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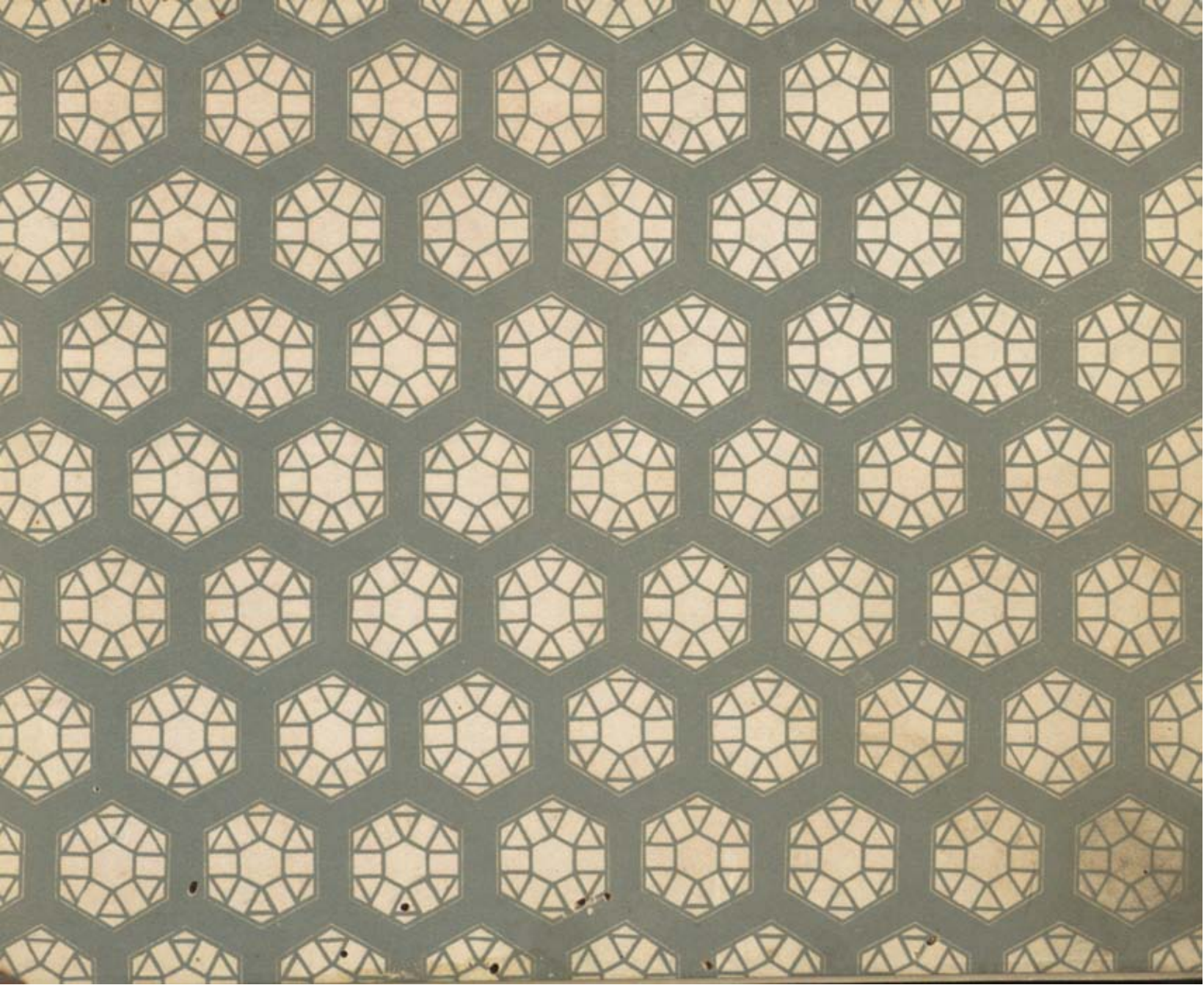
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# THE TAJ

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R & K PUBLISHING HOUSE

First Published July, 1965

Price Rs. 30.00

Printed in India at The Caxton Press Private Limited, New Delhi.  
Published by S. V. Malik for R & K Publishing House.

Received from M/s Munshi Ram Manohar Lal dt. 25/8/65 for P. 30/-

To write a preface to a book on the Taj can only mean one thing: that the writer is out to introduce himself; for the subject is far too well-known to require any prefatory remarks. That, however, is not my intention. I wish, rather, to make use of this convention, of penning prefaces,

for expressing my sincere appreciation of the venture-some spirit which the Publishers have displayed in bringing out a *de-luxe* volume on this magnificent monument. Indeed, I have often wondered why this great and beautiful building has not been receiving the lavish treatment which it more than merits. It is

## Preface



regarded by the whole world as a miracle of architecture. The foreigner is advised by those who have been to India and seen it, "Go to India. The Taj alone is worth the journey"; and the foreigner comes. Within the country, everybody admits freely that the Taj is perhaps our greatest single earner of foreign exchange. And yet, apart from producing shabby picture postcards and pitifully poor guides and albums, what has been done by this country or the world, by the Indian publishers or foreign, by private enterprise or governmental effort, to honour this thing of beauty, this joy for ever? Practically nothing. One feels bewildered, and fails to figure out why there is this neglect, this ingratitude.

So far as publishers in India are concerned, I can understand their difficulty. Book-production is costly business, especially when it is a matter of illustrations and pictorial documentation. Further, if colour plates have to be put in, the expense mounts fast and high, and the risk involved dampens all enthusiasm. But there are fabulously well-off foreign publishers, and travel agencies which fatten on tours and trips to the Taj, and several heavily subsidised government departments which are concerned, in one way or the other, with this magic in marble. Why should these have failed all this while

to do justice to this wondrous gift of Shah Jahan, to this splendid memorial to Mumtaz Mahal? The structure is of considerable size and of unquestioned excellence. In plan and proportion, execution and ornamentation, it is verily the work of giants and jewellers, and, in respect of the costliness of the material used, of a king of kings. Further, the story of the shaping of this tangible symbol of an emperor's undying love for his deceased queen, is as full of romantic sentiment as it is of pale pathos at Love's impotence against dire Death.

And yet there is this fact of what appears to be almost a 'conspiracy of silence' against this wonder of the world. May be that some people believe—after three hundred years of Man's feasting his eyes on this vision of loveliness—that the Taj is only pretty, and picturesque and *petite*—but no more! and not worth the pother of publishing priced, and even priceless, productions. Anyway, my Publishers do not believe that, and I do not, and so here is what, between us, we could do by way of offering our tribute to that Queen of Beauty, that Crown of Buildings, the Taj.

Delhi, 1st June, 1965.

KANWAR LAL

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**CHAPTER**

1



## The Crown of Buildings

*Earth has not anything to show more fair:  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A sight so touching in its majesty:*

WORDSWORTH

### THE TAJ, MAUSOLEUM OF THE MUGHAL

Empress Mumtaz Mahal, is, in the opinion of many critics and connoisseurs, the most beautiful building of the world. It counts among man's proudest creations and is invariably included in the lists of world's foremost wonders. As a tomb, it has no

peer upon earth, for mortal remains have never been housed in greater grandeur. Obviously when, more than three hundred years ago, Shah Jahan, king of kings, promised his dying wife that he would build for her the finest sepulchre ever, he knew what he was talking about. The fairy structure which was



raised in fulfilment of the imperial word turned out to be a thing of such splendour that it has grown to be a byword for artistic building and a measure of architectural magnificence. Its fame has spread far and wide and it is inconceivable that there is any corner of our planet where a report or a reproduction of this most gracious of graves has not reached. Described endlessly in gilded phrases, drawn in pencil or portrayed in colour times out of number, shot-upon scintillating celluloid, both still and movie, one knows not how often, the Taj is possibly the world's most 'familiar' work of art. Nevertheless, it is difficult to convey in words or through pictures an adequate idea of this lovely shrine of love and sorrow. Truly, in so far as one would pen its praises, the attempt is likely to be of a repetitive nature, since adjective and epithet, simile and metaphor have been well nigh exhausted in its delineation. Nor is it easy to present it pictorially, for this vision of paradise, is, in size, a palace and, in finish, a gem of rare workmanship. Consequently, one is faced with a dilemma: Given a casket and a jewel, both full beautiful, how should one display them? Howsoever one may manage it, something will be missed. What one might gain in perspective is bound to be lost in respect of the evaluation of the parts, and *vice versa*. No, the Taj is indescribable; and it cannot be put across in a series of prints. Verily, in

this case, seeing is believing.

And yet, in one sense, seeing the Taj is not believing, because such is the impact of the first view of this glorious edifice that many have admitted to being stunned into a sense of the unreal, or have found the reality far exceeding the repute. Indeed, if a proof were needed to show that our sense of the beautiful is something innate and inherent, that this thing called beauty is a value of values, is one of the absolutes, then one might compare the recorded reactions, on a first visit to this acknowledged masterpiece, of men and women seemingly as far removed in station and sensibility, in training and judgment, in age and ages, as any men and women could be. A traveller like Bernier, a bishop like Heber, a soldier like Roberts, a viceroy like Curzon, a critic like Fergusson, a philosopher like Keyserling—that surely is some assortment. Similarly, among women it would be difficult to deal out from any pack, howsoever one may have shuffled it, a hand consisting of Mrs. Sleeman, Mary Curzon, Margaret Mordecai, Mrs. Walter Tibbits, Anne Flora Steele and Mrs. Gordon Silvey. Yet seeing this crown of buildings, the Taj Mahal, in different times and with different eyes, all of them experience a heart-leap which is almost identical, and feel a thrill so samely that its expression sounds like a relay across the corridors of centuries, and

not an original voice. They all agree as to its indescribability, to its supreme excellence, to its deserved, nay, more than merited fame, to the almost stupefying effect of its loveliness, and to its being worth coming all the way to India.

To begin with Bernier; "I decidedly think", he wrote "that this monument deserves much more to be numbered among the wonders of the world than those unshapen masses, the pyramids of Egypt." And the Bishop: "I went to see the celebrated Taje-Mahal of which it is enough to say that after hearing its praises ever since I had been in India, its beauty rather exceeded than fall short of my expectations. There was much, indeed, which I was not prepared for." And, again, in passing, and while speaking of the East India Company's provinces, "yet, in the character and manners of the people there is much which may be studied with interest and amusement, and in the yet remaining specimens of Oriental pomp at Lucknow, in the decayed, but most striking and romantic magnificence of Delhi and in the Taje-Mahal of Agra (doubtless one of the most beautiful buildings in the world) there is almost enough, even of themselves, to make it worth a man's while to cross the Atlantic and Indian oceans."

In regard to this last, there is the oft-quoted

comment and advice of Lord Roberts : "I will not attempt to describe the indescribable. Neither words nor pencil could give to the most imaginative reader the slightest idea of the all satisfying beauty and purity of this glorious conception. To those who have not seen it, I would say 'Go to India. The Taj alone is well worth the journey'." Lord Curzon, who certainly had not come to India for the sake of the Taj, had nonetheless been impatiently looking forward to a view of this famous monument. Mary Curzon's remarks had already echoed the familiar reaction : "No word of mine can give any idea of the Taj. It is the most divine creation of a building in the whole world. You will never be able to satisfy your eyes by seeing it enough." When he himself saw this building, "at once the most famous and the most beautiful of all the monuments made by the hands of men," he was not disappointed; rather, he was rendered speechless by its ineffable loveliness. To quote his biographer, "As he approached Agra his eyes caught sight of the object of their desire and rested upon 'the pure swelling dome and spear-like minarets of the pearl of fabrics, the gem of man's handiwork, the most devotional of temples, the most solemn of sepulchres, the peerless and incomparable Taj'. No building had ever stirred the emotional depth of his being in quite the same way. 'I stood there and gazed long upon the entrancing spectacle, the



singular loveliness of it pouring in waves over my soul and flooding my inner consciousness till the cup of satiety was full, and I had to shut my eyes and pause and, think'. In the case of all the most famous buildings he had hitherto seen—St. Mark's at Venice, St. Peter's at Rome, the cathedral at Seville—there had been something to criticise, 'some apparent violation of an artistic canon or conflict with one's own esoteric standards of taste'. Here the voice of criticism was completely silenced. 'I could not find it in me to devise wherein, even according to my own faulty notions of beauty and style, it was imperfect or capable of improvement.' In a letter to St. John Brodrick he had sent the following description of his feelings on the occasion. "The Taj is incomparable, designed like a palace and finished like a jewel—a snow-white emanation starting from a bed of cypresses and backed by a turquoise sky, pure, perfect and unutterably lovely. One feels the same sensation as in gazing at a beautiful woman, one who has that mixture of loveliness and sadness which is essential to the highest beauty."

Fergusson, soberest of critics, was affected no less by "the most impressive of all sepulchres of the world", and wrote : "No building in India has been so often drawn and photographed as this, or more frequently described; but, with all this, it is almost impossible

to convey an idea of it to those who have not seen it, not only because of its extreme delicacy, and beauty of material employed in its construction, but from the complexity of its design...With its own purity of material and grace of form the Taj may challenge comparison with any creation of the same sort in the whole world." Keyserling, who could "appreciate art only as the immediate expression of metaphysical reality" and had no interest in small art, thought that the Taj Mahal represented "the most absolute work of art which architects have ever erected". The philosopher was, for once, altogether swept off his feet: "I could not have believed that there could be anything like it. A massive marble structure without weight, as if composed of ether, perfectly rational and yet purely decorative; without ascertainable contents, and yet full of significance in the highest degree; the Taj Mahal is not only one of the greatest works of art, it is perhaps the greatest of all pieces of artifice which the creative spirit of man has ever achieved. The maximum of perfection which seems to be attained here is beyond every gauge of which I know..."

Thus the men, who are deeply affected, but would wrestle, as men will, against a total surrender to the spell. The women, on the other hand, glow with a far greater, with an almost frenzied, feeling. Under-



standably; for, by and large, they do not suffer from the evil of man's intervening intellect, can afford to be simple and straight and open: their hearts speak the words, not their heads. But they have another, and a much stronger reason for their reeling rapture: the memorial is to a woman, and, therefore, an honour to all female-kind. And, so, to them Mumtaz symbolizes the woman who loves and is loved, who is a devoted wife and deserves devotion in return. For these admirers, the Taj Mahal is not just beautiful art and fine architecture, but a memorial to love and faith, is a symbol of that which draws and keeps man and wife together; binds flesh to flesh, makes two hearts beat in unison and unites the souls of lovers, be they lord and lady of the highest, or lad and lassie of the humblest, level. Mrs. Sleeman's classic remark is perhaps the most typical expression of a woman's reaction and her feelings must have been shared by many another visitor of her sex. When asked by her husband what she thought of the Taj, her reply was : "I cannot tell you what I think, for I know not how to criticize such a building, but I can tell you what I feel. I would die tomorrow to have such another over me." Mary Curzon's gush of admiration has been quoted already. Anne Flora Steele, writing the text for Mortimer Mompes' pictures of India, speaks thus : "And what is to be said of the Taj Mahal? Only this—that it rejoices

the heart to think that in his long, sad years of blindness its builder Shah Jehan must have had the memory of its unearthly beauty as a consolation. To know, that for once you have nigh touched perfection, is a great gain. For the rest, I saw the Taj for the first time when I was leaving India after five-and-twenty years of residence therein. I was prepared to criticize. I had heard so much of its beauty that I was inclined to doubt it. And my verdict—of value simply as a personal equation—is that it is a bit of the New Jerusalem." For Margaret Mordecai the wonderful moment of her first sight of the Taj, to which she had looked forward since her thirteenth year, spelt the supreme experience of India. And she too felt the same powerlessness in respect of describing it : "Volumes have been written on the subject. Language has been almost exhausted in its praise!...but after all who can [describe the Taj?]" But to her it meant more than a divinely lovely structure, for it was associated with romance and passion : "The Taj is considered the most beautiful of all the buildings now in the world, but it is not that alone. It is love made tangible, crystallized!" Likewise, Mrs. Tibbits saw in it "love...enshrined in a marble memory so peerless that all lovers from East and West have worshipped at its delicate inlaid shrine, and will do so for all time." This idea that the Taj represents man's homage to love is subscrib-

ed to by many, so that for most people, it holds good that "the Taj at Agra is not only the most exquisite specimen of human architecture" but also "the most gorgeous romance of wedded love". To quote the reaction of a recent woman visitor, Mrs. Silvey,

*As I beheld its wondrous beauty ;  
Of lace, embroidery, emeralds, pearls and rubies  
Gently sewn against the Northern sky,  
I was fascinated—stunned to sudden silence . . . .  
The Supreme expression of human art and ideals ;  
Bespeaking ; . . . .  
The Supreme expression of an Emperor's impassioned love  
For his Queen  
For his wife  
Oh monument to eternal love !*

We shall deal with this theme of the Taj being a monument to love a little later. Here, let us continue with our praise of this building which many have regarded as the very quintessence of Beauty. Enough seems to have been said above, yet that is like nothing. There are, literally, volumes of homage as if every one were joining in a sort of hymn to Beauty. And the names of who said this or that cease to matter for the burden of the song is the same all through : "It is lovely beyond description";

"It is more beautiful than the most beautiful"; "It is too pure, too holy to be the work of human hands. Angels must have brought it from heaven and a glass case should be thrown over it to preserve it from each breath of air"; "We stood spell-bound for a few minutes at this lovely apparition; it hardly seems of the earth earthy. It is more like a dream of celestial beauty. No words can describe it. We felt all previous sights were dimmed in comparison. No such effect is produced by the first view of St. Peter's or Milan or Cologne Cathedrals, they are all majestic, but this is enchantment itself. So perfect is its form that all other structures seem clumsy"; "No building has been more often described, drawn and photographed. But no drawing or photograph can give an idea of so rich and poetical a subject. No description can show forth the whole, combined out of marble dome, fair minarets, and fragrant garden. Words cannot express the multitudinous richness of its ornamentation, perfection of form and minuteness of decoration each lending assistance to the other. This is the true charm of the Taj. It is like unto one of those daughters of the gods who were most divinely fair"; "If there were nothing else in India, this alone would repay the journey. The distant view of this matchless edifice satisfied me that its fame is well deserved. So pure, so gloriously perfect did it appear that I almost feared to approach it lest the



charm should be broken"; "No description however vivid or precise, no colouring however brilliant or varied even if supplemented with painting or drawing can give one a correct idea of the Taj for its nobleness an edifice unparalleled in the annals of Eastern Architecture"; "There is no mystery, no sense of partial failure about the Taj. A thing of perfect beauty and of absolute finish in every detail, it might pass for the work of a genie, who knew nought of the weakness and ills with which mankind is beset".

But let us desist, not because, "art will die of overpraise", but because there are such miles upon miles of similar quotations, of such wreaths of words which visitors would place upon the tomb as a mark of their homage to the holy memory of Mumtaz, and of their appreciation of this vision of Beauty! And since most of them, though finding it indescribable, would still, as King Edward VII remarked wittily, "proceed to give some idea of it", strange and new phrases are coined, superlatives and hyperbole are freely employed, and startling metaphors are daringly used to do justice to this beauty made incarnate and love made tangible. Thus treated, the Taj, "fresh, clean, unspotted by time", appears to be "not so much a building as an essay in pure mathematics". The Emperor Shah Jahan had intended it to be and regarded it as "an edifice like those in

the garden of paradise". It is a "sigh made stone", a "poem in marble", a "vision of enchantment", "a dream in solid, palpable and permanent marble—a thought, an idea, a conception of tenderness, a sigh as it were of eternal devotion and heroic love, caught and imbued with such immortality as the earth can give". "The proudest of all sepulchral monuments", it is, "in purity, lustre and beauty, as unrivalled on earth, as the moon is in the high heavens." The entire building is "Sheer Beauty". It is the "ivory gate" of Kipling "through which all good dreams come." The gateway is a "worthy pendant". The garden is "an exquisite emerald setting for a perfect pearl." The minarets are like "maids of honour attending on the Queen". Altogether it "forms a faultless congregation of architectural beauties and once seen, their image can never be obliterated from one's mind while memory holds her seat."

What the earlier writers experienced, the latest share : wonderment. The only difference is that the modern writer, often well-read and utility-minded confronts the Taj, if not as a scoffer, certainly as a sceptic. The reason is that for some time now it has been the fashion to criticise the Taj, on one count or another; to say that "The Taj is lacking in strict architectural beauty", or that it represents the tyranny and oppression of kings, symbolises the



orrow and slavery of subjects who were forced into life-long labour over construction of extravagant palaces and gorgeous gardens for the dead, while the living had not a handful of grain to eat, nor a hovel to hide their heads in. Of the denunciations on account of its architectural flaws, the most celebrated comes from the pen of Aldous Huxley. To him, the Taj was a disappointment. He writes of this at length : "My failure to appreciate the Taj is due, I think, to the fact that, while I am very fond of architecture and the decorative arts, I am very little interested in the expensive or the picturesque, as such and by themselves. Now the great qualities of the Taj are precisely those of expensiveness and picturesqueness. Milk-white amongst its dark cypresses, flawlessly mirrored, it is positively the *Toteninsel* of Arnold Boecklin come true. And its costliness is fabulous. Its marbles are carved and filigreed, are patterned with an inlay of precious stones. The smallest rose or poppy on the royal tombs is an affair of twenty or thirty cornelians, onyxes, agates, chrysolites. The New Jerusalem was not more rich in variety of precious pebbles. If the Viceroy took it into his head to build another Taj identical with the first, he would have to spend as much as a fifteenth or even perhaps a twelfth or tenth of what he spends each year on the Indian Army. Imagination staggers. .... This inordinate costliness is what most people seem to

like about the Taj".

And again "its elegance is at the best of a very dry and negative kind. Its 'classicism' is the product not of intellectual restraint imposed on an exuberant fancy, but of an actual deficiency of fancy, a poverty of imagination. One is struck at once by the lack of variety in the architectural forms of which it is composed. There are, for all practical purposes, only two contrasting formal elements in the whole design—the onion dome, reproduced in two dimensions in the pointed arches of the recessed bays, and the flat wall surface with its sharply rectangular limits. When the Taj is compared with more or less contemporary European buildings in the neo-classic style of the High Renaissance and Baroque periods, this poverty in the formal elements composing it becomes very apparent. Consider, for example, St. Paul's. The number of component forms in its design is very large. We have the hemispherical dome, the great colonnaded cylinder of the drum, the flat side-walls relieved by square-faced pilasters and rounded niches; we have, at one end, the curved surfaces of the apse and, at the other, the West Front with its porch—a design of detached cylinders (the pillars), seen against a flat wall, and supporting yet another formal element, the triangular pediment. If it is argued that St. Paul's is a very much larger building than the Taj, and that we should

therefore expect the number of contrasting elements in its design to be greater, we may take a smaller specimen of late Renaissance architecture as our standard of comparison. I suggest Palladio's Rotonda at Vicenza, a building somewhat smaller than the Taj and, like it, of regular design and domed. Analysing the Rotonda we shall find that it consists of a far larger number of formal elements than does the Taj, and that its elegance, in consequence, is much richer, much more subtle and various than the poor, dry, negative elegance characteristic of the Indian building.

"But it is not necessary to go as far as Europe to find specimens of a more varied and imaginative elegance than that of the Taj. The Hindu architects produced buildings incomparably more rich and interesting as works of art... The temples at Chitor, for example, are specimens of true classicism. They are the products of a prodigious, an almost excessive, fancy, held in check and directed by the most judicious intelligence. Their elegance—and in their way they are just as elegant as the Taj—is an opulent and subtle elegance, full of unexpected felicities. The formal elements of their design are numerous and pleasingly contrasted, and the detail—mouldings and ornamental sculpture—is always, however copious, subordinated to the architectural

scheme and of the highest decorative quality."

Controversies in the sphere of art are more easily started than settled, and if the Taj has been and continues to be a thing of beauty and joy for ever to millions of people, a vote less or more, in favour or against, is of little importance. All the same, it may not be out of place to point out that Huxley's criticism appears to be based on wrong premise. The two main planks of his criticism—apart from the fact that the Taj is of marble—are, first, that there are only two formal elements in the design of the Taj and secondly, that the decorative element is poor. If one were to remember that the simplicity of the Taj—which is a mausoleum, and should not be compared with temples, churches or palaces—could have been intentional and that Islam placed, still places, restrictions as to the decorative elements, much of the criticism becomes pointless. Shah Jahan and his architects had all the specimens of Indian architecture, including Hindu architecture of Rajasthan and its temples at Chitor or elsewhere, for them to see and seek inspiration from. What is more, there was Grand Father Akbar's Fatehpur Sikri with all kinds of buildings, each clearly having its own function and intention; and surely if Akbar could make Buland Darwaza, Great mosque, Diwan-i-Khas, Birbal's House, Jodhabai's palace or Panch Mahal, each of



its own kind, Shah Jahan and his architects might be given the credit of knowing what they wanted to create. They did not want an elaborate design; they were not for an amalgam of too many formal elements. This, therefore, is no way to judge a creation in the field of architecture. "In its own class", as Fergusson puts it; that is the right approach, and *sympathetically*, if one may use the word in the sense of first understanding the creator's intent, and then evaluating it by rules and canons which apply in the case one is considering. It is easy to make a sweeping statement : "Indeed, it seems to me that any one who professes an ardent admiration for the Taj must look at it without having any standards of excellence in his mind—as though the thing existed uniquely, in a vacuum. But the Taj exists in a world well sprinkled with masterpieces of architecture and decoration. Compare it with these, and the Imperial Mausoleum at once takes its proper place in the hierarchy of art—well down below the best. But it is made of marble. Marble I perceive, covers a multitude of sins." There are no common yard-sticks to measure excellence like that. As for marble, it may or may not cover a multitude of sins, but surely the costliness of the Taj or its popularity, however distasteful to the steel-minded intellectual that Huxley was, is no argument against the building. Indeed, there are times when

seeing its snow-whiteness one marvels:

*Fashioned so purely,  
Fragilely, surely,  
From what Paradisal  
Imaginless metal,  
Too costly for cost ?*

Talking of the cost of the Taj, there are all kinds of conjectures and accounts. One estimate puts it at 50 lakhs of rupees. This follows the mention of the figure in Abdul Hamid Lahori's *Badshah Nama*. According to this historian, "the Taj was completed in 22 years under the supervision of Makramat Khan and Mir Abdul Karim, and the total cost was fifty lakhs of rupees." This, as several authorities point out, is ridiculously low, even for the comparatively cheap labour and cost of material of those times. Some of them are, therefore, of the opinion that this sum represents the amount paid by way of wages and salaries, and does not include the cost of the material. This last, the material, in the view of a few, came either as gifts and presents or was just taken away like that from wherever available. Much of it might have been contributed from the royal treasures. There are others who believe neither that the material was not paid for nor that the labour was all forced and, therefore, free, but accept the other figure of about four and a half crores, as the total cost. In his authoritative book on the Taj, Muin-



ud-din Ahmed refers to a manuscript in which Rudradas *Khazanchi*—a treasurer—has given a detailed account of the expense incurred on the Taj. This is given part by part, and to the last pie. The total figure amounts to Rs. 4,18,48,826 seven annas and pies six only. The account rendered and the amounts entered for each item seem convincing, and it would appear reasonably sound to accept this figure. Of course, whether ten times that sum will today yield such another mausoleum is another question. Before we close this question of costs and matter of money, let us state in passing that Shah Jahan made excellent arrangements for providing necessary funds for the repair and upkeep of the mausoleum and for the maintenance of the staff and attendants. The annual revenue of thirty villages amounting to a lakh of rupees and another lakh of rupees accruing as taxes from the bazars, *serais*, and other establishments of this kind in the Taj Ganj area—all this was meant exclusively for the purpose mentioned above. In addition, he used to distribute rupees fifty thousand annually on the death anniversary of the empress, if he were himself at Agra; otherwise a sum of rupees twelve thousand was given away to the attendants and the poor.

To revert, however, to Huxley's condemnation. This is couched in such emphatic terms that those who

have followed him have been self-conscious as he confessed he himself was : "I am always a little uncomfortable when I find myself unable to admire something which all the rest of the world admires or at least is reputed to admire. Am I, or is the world the fool? Is it the world's taste that is bad, or is mine?" This makes it difficult for them to keep an open mind. That is why the present-day visitor feels much trepidation and nervousness when approaching the Taj, and much discomfort, not relief, if he likes the building, if it comes up to, and goes beyond, the expectations with which one had come. That is why, too, modern descriptions betray a strange hesitation to speak out as spontaneously and freely as the visitor of yore could and would. Nonetheless, the result is the same. And exclamation marks still punctuate the praise as they did before. "No description", Mundy had written in his sketches of India, "can convey an idea of the beauty and elegance of this monument of uxorious fondness. It is, I think, the only object in India that I had heard previously eulogized, in which I was not disappointed on actual inspection." Any traveller writing his sketches of this country today might be quoted at random, and one will find that time has not dimmed the glory of the Taj nor earlier efforts made the task of capturing its beauty any the easier. Here is one, Roderick Cameron : "And how beautiful was the Taj when we

first came upon it! It seemed to be carved in mellow ivory, smooth, solid ivory of every tone, from palest cream to a soft, deep ochre. Every change of light seemed to lend new grace to it. But what really were my first impressions? Surprise, I think at its immense size, and then, once closer to the mausoleum itself, the feeling one has of infinite sadness." Another, Peter Schmidt, puts it thus : "I approached the Taj Mahal with some trepidation. Would I be disappointed? Would reality measure up to that dream-like poetry which imperfect pictures had nourished in our imagination ever since childhood? At last I was standing before the tall gateway topped by a row of delicate pavilions. I stepped into its half-light, and immediately felt drawn by a radiant whiteness ahead, which, as I penetrated farther, took on the shape of domes and turrets and, upon passing through the second archway, gleamed in front of me against a blue sky...."

And then? "And then suddenly the distant shimmering white against the blue sky comes to you like a greeting from another world. In no other architectural monument has the transcendental become matter in such a miraculous manner as here. Right in the middle of turbulent life we are touched by the strange, delicate, and alluring magic of pure spirituality."

And, again "In the evening before my departure

I drove out once more to the Taj Mahal. The gathering dusk had extinguished the red and the green hues. But the dome floated high up under the departing sunlight, fragile against the pale silk of the sky, veined by the joints of the stone blocks, like the breast of a delicate woman."

And all this in a chapter entitled "Refuse-bins for the Living Fairy-tale palaces for the dead!" Anyway, artistically, the Taj holds the ground. Critical Cameron and shrewd Schmidt allow that it still attracts. True, they do not wax poetic like Kipling did : "...the Taj took a hundred new shapes, each perfect and each beyond description. It was the Ivory Gate through which all good dreams come; it was the realisation of the gleaming halls of dawn that Tennyson sings of; it was veritably the 'aspiration fixed', the sigh made stone of a lesser poet; and over and above concrete comparisons, it seemed the embodiment of all things pure and all things holy, and all things unhappy." Nevertheless, and Huxley and some other, lesser writers notwithstanding, the Taj still reflects the face of glory.

The other type of criticism that the dead queens and kings of history were laid in grand and stately tombs or, for that matter, lived in large luxurious palaces while their subject starved and shivered,



is too puerile to merit serious notice. Even so, one might say a word or two about it, especially because this kind of criticism is being inflicted upon the Taj, although it could apply, with equal aptness or ineptness, to all the stupendous ruins and remains of Yesterday, to all temples and churches and mosques, to all palaces and tombs and gardens of History. Nay, it should apply, were we honest, to whatever is extravagant and wasteful construction, even today; should apply to Rajghat and Chandigarh of Modern India no less than to the Victoria Memorial and New Delhi of the British India, or to Fatehpur Sikri, and the Taj Mahal of the Mughal period. And yet, each epoch has its justifications, for expending time and energy and money on the structures that it chooses to raise. In any case, criticism of this kind is hardly of any value. In fact, nothing could be more futile, for we cannot cancel history, and whether we are pleased about it or not, the past is past, beyond recall. Of course, we can demolish the Taj and all the great and great many buildings that bedeck and beautify the surface of the earth even though they are but tombs and palaces, and churches and temples, of the bad generations of unregenerate men who have lived before us; and we can make them serve as hospitals and schools, and orphanages and military barracks, and store-houses for atom bombs or other goods of public good. But somehow the saner element

in humanity has always wanted to keep these precious relics, to guard these monuments to Beauty against decay and destruction. William Bentinck nearly auctioned off the marble of the Taj, the very thought of which nearly a century later, drove a gentle lady to such anger that she wrote of this Viceroy of India in scathing terms, thus : "This personage held the position of which he was so unworthy from 1828 till 1835. It is true that Suttees were abolished during his regime, but not at his instance, but at that of the Maharajah Ram Mohun Roy. What he did of his own inspiration was to take a great quantity of the marble lacework and jewel flower mosaics out of the Agra palace and sell them at auction! Happily, most happily, the sale was a failure, for otherwise Lord William was determined, and had made a proposal to the British Government to that effect, to demolish the Taj and sell the fragments. Not even was the barbarian in any way deterred by the fact that the Taj was a tomb. He may have possessed good qualities with which we are unacquainted, and he is long since dead, but I am glad that we were not contemporaries, for though I have no experience in bomb-throwing, my temptation would have been very great."

Normally, of course, viceroys or governments do not have such an attitude to historical buildings. On



the contrary, the general sentiment is of treating them as priceless heirlooms. Modern governments and peoples follow the way Curzon felt and went about it: "As a pilgrim at the shrine of beauty I have visited them, but as a priest in the temple of deity have I charged myself with their reverent custody and their studious repair." And again, "I regard the stately or beautiful or historic fabrics of a bygone age as a priceless heirloom, to be tenderly and almost religiously guarded by succeeding generations; and during my administration of the Government of India no one shall find me niggardly or grudging in practical realization of this aim." A few years of this attitude and interest and he could say : "The Taj itself and all its surroundings are now all but free from the workmen's hands. It is no longer approached through dusty wastes and a squalid bazaar. A beautiful park takes their place; and the group of mosques and tombs, the arcaded streets and grassy courts, that precede the main building, are once more as nearly as possible what they were when completed by the masons of Shah Jahan. Every building in the garden enclosure of the Taj has been scrupulously repaired, and the discovery of old plans has enabled us to restore the water channels and flowerbeds of the garden more exactly to their original state. We have done the same with the remaining building at Agra." He had been advised that it was no concern of a Christian

Government to conserve the monuments of a pagan art or of alien faiths. And his approach had been that "art and beauty and the reverence that was owing to all that had evoked human genius, or had inspired human faith, were independent of particular creeds. There was no principle of artistic discrimination between the mausoleum of the despot and the sepulchre of the saint. That which was beautiful, that which was historic, that which tore the mask off the face of the past and helped mankind to read its riddles—these and not the dogmas of a combative theology were the criteria by which they should be guided." This is by now such an axiom that even a Communist regime will revere the country's ruins and relics howsoever sharply reminiscent of cruelty of the past rulers, of the centuries of oppression of the proletariat, of the age of Czars and priests they might be. Had not Maxim Gorky said, and truly, "Citizens, do not touch one stone . . . all this is your history, your pride." And if this sort of thing should be true of a stray stone here and a broken arch there, what shall we say of the Taj, and how to cherish and value this treasure of treasures? It is difficult, indeed, to understand how any one can seriously hold it against the Taj that, while the living conditions of the living are what they are, it has no business to be a thing of beauty and a source of joy. Luckily, the people who throng in millions upon millions to gaze at this marvel

prefer that the Taj stay as the Taj for ever, for although all art and beauty may be useless, man doth not live by bread alone. He needs more; and among the things which he needs in addition to bread, there is that too which he gets from gazing at the Countenance of Beauty. This ideal Face has a myriad features and countless reflections. Its light may be seen in the sheen of a tress or the curve of a lip, in the merriment of ripples or in the silence of snows, in the

star-spangled skies or in the glory of the moon-beams, in setting suns and rising seas, in the dance of daffodils or in a flight of planes, in a rose of Nature or a fruit of Art, in a grandiose monument or an exquisite miniature, in the words of poets or the laughter of children, in many things, indeed. Yet who can deny that of all the innumerable forms and endless images which this Countenance of Beauty claims, this Crown of Buildings, the Taj, certainly constitutes one of the finest!







**CHAPTER**

2





## “When I am Dead My Dearest.”

*Alas, that Spring should vanish with the Rose!*

*That Youth's sweet-scented manuscript should close!*

*The Nightingale that in the bushes sang,*

*Ah, whence, and whither flown again, who knows!*

OMAR KHAYYAM

THE WOMAN TO WHOM WE ARE INDEBTED, at least indirectly, for the gift of the peerless Taj, is known to history as Mumtaz Mahal, ‘Elect of the Palace’. She was the favourite wife of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan to whom she had been married in 1612, when he was still Prince Khurram.

Jahangir was the ruler then, and Nur Jahan, sister of Mumtaz's father, Asaf Jah, was Queen Empress, both of the kingdom and of the king's heart. The story of this imperial romance between Salim, later Jahangir, and Mehr-ul-nissa, as Nur Jahan was known when a maiden, is so celebrated a thing that it over-



shadows many another love-affair and love-marriage of the Mughal royalty. Any why not? For never was man's heart steeped deeper in infatuation for woman than was Jahangir's. Having once lost it to this person when she was but a gay lass and he a spoilt prince, he never could get over his passion for this "sun among women". For her, they say, he rebelled against his great father, Akbar the Great, who would not agree to annul her betrothal to one Ali Kuli Beg alias Sher Afghan who duly married her. For her, they say, he got this man, her first husband, assassinated. For her he waited endless years from boyhood to middle age, and finally when in 1611, she did agree to become his wife, he treated and honoured her, as few other kings in history have treated and honoured a wife. Bewitchingly beautiful, she was already known as Nur Mahal, 'Light of the Harem'. Now he gave her the title of Nur Jahan, 'Light of the World', and made her joint ruler with himself so that her name appeared on the coins in terms which are a delight to read, for a king's chivalry and love could hardly have been couched in finer phrases: "By order of the King Jahangir, gold has a hundred lustres added to it by receiving the impression of Nur Jahan, the Queen Begum". The name of Nur Jahan, the Queen Begum, appeared jointly with the king's signature on all *farmans*. Day by day, her power increased, so that a time came

when Jahangir was king only in name. And he, the great lover, not only knew this but openly avowed that he had bestowed sovereignty of the realm on his Begum and Beloved for a cup of wine!

With Nur Jahan risen to such heights it was natural that her relatives and connexions should bask in the shine of her imperial favour. Her father Mirza Ghias Beg had made his mark earlier, in Akbar's reign. He had come all the way from Persia to seek his fortune in the far-famed court of the Great Mughal. He had learnt that this king's presence was a rendezvous for all talent, that unlimited opportunity existed for whoever had merit which that discerning ruler was always quick to recognise. The Mirza had not been able to achieve much in his own country, but being a man of parts, and, what is more possessing unbounded faith in himself he had never lost hope that he would some day somewhere, make good. So he had set out to the distant capital of Akbar, and it was on the way to India that Mehr-ul-nissa was born. The parents had never been in sorer strait and abandoned the child in the wilderness. Then that happened which happens usually in fairy tales, but now and then, in real life when truth seems stranger than fiction. The Mirza and his wife could not for long sustain their resolution to proceed without their baby and the mother

made the father go back to pick it up from under the tree where they had left it. When Ghias reached there, lo and behold ! a cobra stood guard over the girl. The splendid hood of the serpent was held like a throne's canopy over the little head which was destined to wear a crown. The panic-stricken father all but dragged his offspring away from the shadow of the snake, and heaving sighs of relief, and muttering thanks to Allah who had kept the girl from harm, he ran to the distressed mother who was twice happy to find her daughter alive and back into her bosom after that harrowing separation.

Mirza Ghias did not have to wait long for a recognition of his ability and attainments. His supreme self-confidence which had carried him to Akbar's court had been no whim nor vanity. He rose to eminence with speed, and became, in virtue of his intellectual gifts, first the superintendent of the household and then the Lord High Treasurer of the Realm. It is as this last, Etmad-ud-daula, that he is familiar to most of us.

When Nur Jahan rose to be the ruler of the realm, the Mirza's star reached its zenith. He was made the vizier, Prime Minister, and when he was gathered to his forefathers, his daughter built that pretty jewel of a monument, his tomb, which enshrines his

remains and memory and stands as an eternal symbol of a great daughter's tribute to a great father. The tomb is remarkable for its combination of elegance and delicacy which reflects truly the fine and refined taste of Nur Jahan. Her personality is stamped all over the mausoleum which, for decoration and prettiness, was to serve as a model for the Taj.

After their father's death, the sister promoted her brother, Asaf Jah, to the rank of the first noble, so that the centre of power was not allowed to shift to any other family. Keeping this last in view, it was good policy, obviously, to arrange a matrimonial alliance between Arjmand Banu, Asaf Jah's daughter and the queen's niece, and the Queen's step-son, the king's favourite and, all but in name, the heir-apparent, Prince Khurram. And for many historians, there is nothing more to the marriage of Mumtaz and Shah Jahan beyond this political expediency, beyond the chess-moves of the game of power. Yet some people believe that in this match also, it was love's cunning and not mere state-craft which was at play, even as it had been in the case of the romance of Salim and Mehr-ul-nissa. Historians are silent on that point, generally, and refer baldly to Mumtaz's marriage in 1612, when she was nineteen, to the Prince who was but a year or so older. Of course, there were splendid celebrations, and pomp and pageantry galore on



the occasion. But apparently it was nothing out of the ordinary. For instance, the account of this marriage given in one whole book of history of Shah Jahan makes but a brief paragraph. It refers to "magnificent processions by day, and expensive fire-works by night", and adds: "The entire city of Agra was *en fete*. This gaiety, it seems, lasted for about a month, for at the end of it Jahangir went to the house of his son to participate in the marriage feast. The prince offered presents to his father, jewels to the *begums*, and dresses of honour to the *amirs*". That is all, for the historian moves on to the matter of other wives of Shah Jahan. And this, this meagre, measured description in a book about a period which abounded in regal display and rhetorical record thereof. Witness Sir Thomas Rowe's gilded account of Jahangir's celebration of his birthday, or the description of a banquet once given by Asaf Jah to Shah Jahan, which almost every text-book on Indian history carries.

Others of the same trade, writing briefer histories, can spare but a sentence or two, put in, almost in parenthesis, while describing the struggle for succession after Jahangir's death or the death of the Empress, Mumtaz Mahal, some years later in 1631. Nevertheless, there are some writers who, less scholarly may be and moving far from the awful and hallowed

ground which the Muse of History treads, have pages upon pages to write about what to them seems an event most eventful. And that for many reasons. For one thing this marriage, one of the three which Shah Jahan contracted, was successful to a degree rare in the context of royalty. Mumtaz must have been a most remarkable woman, indeed, to have kept to herself the entire love and attention of her lord for the nineteen years of their married life, years in which they were literally never separated, in which she was ever his support and consolation as well as his wife and beloved, and in which she bore him fourteen children. What is more, when she died, the emperor was grief-stricken as few men in like circumstances would be. Inconsolable he was, but such had been his passion for her, such his feeling for her even when she was no more, that he needs must build to her memory a moon-like matchless mausoleum. The traditional view which most people entertain of the harem-life of an oriental monarch is so mercilessly upset by all this that one Western writer breaks into the following characteristic comment on the Taj :

"And surely, of all the quaintly upside down, blindingly contradictory things in the wide world is this, that in the land of Great Mughals, Grand Turks, Harems, Zenanas, down-trodden woman-

hood, loveless marriages, polygamy, bestial couplings, and so forth. .this monument of exceeding, unparalleled beauty should stand as one of the seven wonders of the world, a record of the love given to a wife who died when her 13th (sic) child was born !”

Another writer, K.C. Mazumdar, explains how Mumtaz was able to have such an exclusive hold on the affections of her husband. “The family of Etmad-ud-daula was an exceptionally talented one, both in the male and in the female line. Both Nur Jahan and her niece captured the hearts of their royal lovers, which was due to something more than their physical charms alone. What, then, was the ‘witchcraft’ they used ? Sharp intelligence, feminine grace, benignity of heart and a high sense of womanly self-respect helped them to become sovereigns over a sovereign’s heart. The charms of physical beauty wear off with passing years, but the superior charms of the head and the heart create a new fascination from hour to hour and captivate the mind with irresistible force. Jahangir was frivolous and was ruled by Nur Jahan. He acknowledged her superiority and felt happy that she was governing him as well as his subjects. Mumtaz Mahal was Shah Jahan’s loving mistress, his comrade, his counsellor. She inspired him to acts of charity and benevolence,

brought him the message of real conjugal love which was divine in character, and filled his heart with mercy for the weak and the needy. These teachings the emperor could never forget, and this is the reason why Shah Jahan cherished the memory of the beloved queen of his heart to the very hour of his death. On the 22nd of January, 1666, in the 75th year of his age, he passed away, as he sat reclining against the arms of his eldest daughter, Jahanara, who had shared her father’s captivity, gazing with steadfast and longing eyes on the Taj, the last resting-place of the treasured mistress of his heart, whose loss he had mourned for the last 36 years.”

All this has given rise, understandably, to the idea that the Taj Mahal symbolises the romance of wedded love. Nay, there are those who regard the great affection of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal not as a matter of wedded love, but as a romance as rightfully romantic as any. In their opinion, the Taj is a memorial not to conjugal affection, but to romantic love. The story remains unconfirmed even as several other romances including Salim’s two loves, with Anarkali and Nur Jahan, are; and for aught we know, it may be the figment of an over-heated imagination. But all the details are there, and seemingly, they fit into and belong to the pattern of the Mughal romances. At least one writer has given a full,



amazingly different and richly readable tale of love that brooks no delay, and allows no obstacle in its way. According to this version, Arjmand Banu, daughter of Asaf Jah, had been married already to one Jamal Khan, before she attracted the notice of Prince Khurram. The fateful first meeting of these great lovers of history took place on the occasion of one of those celebrated fetes and festivals which the Mughal royalty and aristocracy were so fond of organising. The *Meena Bazars* of the Mughals were an institution of such exquisite fun and such graceful frivolity that they deserve a whole volume of study all to themselves. On certain days of festivity like the *Naurauz* and *Khushrau*, especially, the gayest of bazars would be set up. And there the beauty of the Mughal capital would act as stall-keepers and the chivalry of the Mughal kingdom moved about as buyers. Naturally the pretty traders would, at times, seek to sell goods different from what their stalls held, and a princely purchaser might, now and then, pay more than the price of what he bought or might casually drop a jewel of fabulous worth as a token of interest not in the merchandise but in the merchant herself. It was on such an occasion that the future Mumtaz Mahal first met Shah Jahan. The young-beauty, niece of Nur Jahan, must have been a wonderful person, for, like her aunt, she had inherited the looks of her grand-mother and the brains of the grand-

father. Both these great heroines of Mughal history, who were to bring to their family the unique distinction of providing two successive empresses for the imperial throne, had drawn their great gifts from the same source, and between them they represent all that is best in Persian culture and womanhood; grace, poise, polish, charm, etiquette, sense of beauty, passion for art, faultless taste, abiding love and faithfulness. Withal they were beautiful as few women have been beautiful. One may take it that gracious, vivacious, and endowed with all that nature and nurture could provide, Mumtaz, looking pretty and petite as she acted the mock trader, must have been one of cupid's most dependable arrows to pierce a heart with. Against such an array of womanly attractions, Shah Jahan could have had little chance. And so, when he saw her he was readily conquered. Here is one version of the fateful meeting : "It was at a gathering of the kind (we have described), in the imperial palace at Delhi, that Shah Jahan and Mumtaz first met. The Emperor Jahangir, the father of Shah Jahan, had desired all the ladies to provide precious stones, and the noblemen were commanded to purchase at whatever price the ladies asked. Mumtaz Zamani had been requested by her husband Jemal Khan to take charge of a stall and so attractive was this fair lady both in person and manners that she drew a large circle of friends, and speedily parted

with her precious stones for a fabulous sum.

It was when she had disposed of her stock-in-trade that the prince Shah Jahan drew near to her booth, and seeing the beautiful lady, advanced to her side, and asked her what she had to sell. With the quick-wittedness of woman, she promptly answered that she only possessed one large diamond, and that its price was very high. The prince desired to see it, and the fair one showed him a piece of fine transparent sugar-candy of tolerably good diamond figure. With a pleasant air she demanded a lakh of rupees, £ 12,500, for the worthless article; and the prince instantly complied with her request, and paid over the money.

This transaction led to further conversation, and Shah Jahan proved that the wit of Mumtaz Zamani was as exquisite as her beauty. But, alas ! the same could not be said of her modesty and womanly reserve. The prince invited her at the close of the fair to his palace, and instead of answering his request with the indignation and spirit of the lady who was in a similar way tempted by Akbar, she weakly consented, flattered by the attention of the heir-apparent.

When the husband of Mumtaz Zamani heard of her folly and when she returned to his abode, he

refused to see her face. Thereupon the lady made complaint to her lover, and Shah Jahan, with princely vehemence, ordered Jemal Khan to the elephant garden, there to be trodden to death. Before the stern sentence was attempted to be carried into effect, however, the luckless husband of the frail Mumtaz Zamani sought permission to speak to the offended prince. Being graciously allowed the favour, he proceeded to explain, in a despicable spirit of unmanliness, that his coldness to his wife, far from being designed as an insult to the heir-apparent, was intended as the highest possible compliment. The craven-hearted but much-sinned-against man declared that he was not angry with his lady for her unfavourable reception of the royal advances, but that he felt himself unworthy to receive back to his house one who had gained the affection of Shah Jahan. The prince was delighted with the turn affairs were taking, gave Jemal Khan a royal suit with the command of five thousand horse, and relieved him of his domestic difficulty by taking his wife away from him."

As remarked earlier, there is no historical evidence in support of the incident narrated above, or for that matter, in support of any pre-marriage romance associated with these two celebrities of Mughal annals. For history the accepted truth is that of a diplomatic marriage between the most eligible bachelor of the



kingdom, the heir-apparent, and the grand-daughter, of a noble man of power and influence, Etmud-ud-daula, whose daughter had, in addition, become the Queen Empress only a year earlier. According to some historians, the two marriages are interlinked since the engagement between Arjmand Banu and Khurram, lingered on and was made to linger on for several years precisely because Nur Jahan, the aunt of the Lady of the Taj, would not agree to accept Jahangir's offer of marriage. Born in 1592 Mumtaz Mahal was but fifteen when, in 1607, Jahangir consented that she be betrothed to Prince Khurram. Khurram was married off, in 1610, to another woman, while this engagement dragged on. There are those who read in this a move amounting to pressure-tactics on the part of Jahangir, so that Nur Jahan, then widow of Sher Afghan, might relent. If such was the intention of the emperor, the game succeeded, for the aunt agreed to marry the father in 1611, within a year whereafter, the nuptials of the queen's niece with the king's son were solemnised. The emperor was all graciousness. With his own hands, he fastened the pearl-bands to the bridegroom's turban, honoured the son by staying at his house for a day and a night, and conferred on the daughter-in-law the dignity and title of *Mumtaz Mahal*, 'Elect of the Palace', a title which the whole world has now cause to remember because of its association with her

wondrous tomb.

Writing about this matter in his history of Shah Jahan of Dihli, Dr. Banarsi Prasad Saksena builds up an entire case of moves and counter-moves made for love's sake but love not of Shah Jahan for Mumtaz, but that of Jahangir for Nur Jahan: "On September 7, 1609, Prince Khurram received from his father a ruby with two single pearls worth about 40,000 rupees. Four months later he was betrothed to the daughter of Mirza Muzaffar Hussain Safavi, a lineal descendant of Shah Ismail of Persia. Why Jahangir should have gone out of his way to contract this alliance, especially when the prince was already engaged to Arjumand Banu, seems at first sight inexplicable. No doubt, polygamy was more of a rule than an exception in the Moghul house, but this was something quite different. Prince Khurram had not yet been married to his first fiancée: where was the need of having another? The plea that he was of marriageable age cannot be advanced because he was not immediately married to the Safavid princess; on the contrary, the celebration of the actual rite was postponed for about a year. Nor is there any hint in the contemporary records of Khurram's having suddenly fallen in love with her; at least his later life does not warrant such a conclusion. Finally, no political motive can be seen behind

the move. Something significant must have happened to change the mind of the Emperor. In the absence of any other evidence, it is necessary to read between the lines, and to examine certain circumstances in the light of well-known facts. Sher Afghan was killed in Bengal on March 30, 1607, and his wife Mihru-ul-Nisa, was summoned to court. After her arrival she was placed on the staff of Salimah Begum the dowager empress. It is highly probably that, shortly after this, Jahangir saw her, fell in love with her and began to press his suit assiduously. When he failed to win the highly sentimental lady, he naturally resorted to other tactics. He might have threatened to cloud her niece's happiness by superseding her, and to show that he was serious he betrothed his son to the Persian princess. But when the move did not produce the desired effect, Jahangir celebrated the marriage of the prince on October 29, 1610. He went to the latter's house and passed the night there. He also presented robes of honour to most of the *amirs*, and released many prisoners from the fort of Gwalior." And again, "Jahangir was ultimately successful in his love affair, and married Mihru-ul-Nisa on May 25, 1611. He gave her the title of Nur Mahal, and undoubtedly she proved to be the light of Emperor's eyes. Her inclusion in the *haram* introduced a new force into the life of the court. Slowly but steadily she spread her influence

to every nook and corner. From the beginning her eye was on Prince Khurram, but before entrusting her niece's happiness into his hands, she wanted to make him feel that his rise depended on her support. She, therefore, had him promoted to the rank of 12,000 *zat* and 5,000 *suwar* on March 27, 1612, and about four weeks later the nuptials of the long-engaged pair were performed."

For those who would like to dismiss the love-and-romance notion, it could be added that after his marriage with Mumtaz, Shah Jahan married yet once more. Dr. Saxena comments on this as follows : "Prince Khurram's third wife was the daughter of Shahnawaz Khan, son of the famous 'Abdur-Rahim Khan Khanan, whom he married on 23rd August, 1617 when he was in the Deccan. This alliance was certainly dictated by diplomatic considerations. The prince was able to foresee that his future field of activities was to be in the Deccan; and none was more familiar with that region than the unscrupulous Khan Khanan. Matrimonial relationship seemed to be the best way of securing his ungrudging help. Besides this, Shahnawaz Khan, his son, was a promising young genius, and Khurram wanted to include him in the circle of his personal adherents, whose number he was now skilfully increasing."



For completely demolishing the concept that the Taj is associated with love before marriage or loyalty after death, we may consider rather adverse views and opinions about Shah Jahan's sex-life held by several writers and historians. An excellent summary of these has been given by Dr. Saxena. "The character of Shah Jahan is a very controversial topic. Indian chroniclers paint him as the very ideal of a Muslim monarch...according to their picture Shah Jahan appears as a virtuous and affable sovereign with hardly a blemish in his character worth mentioning."

In direct contrast to this are the assertions of contemporary European travellers. Bernier and Manucci describe numerous scandals connected with the private life of Shah Jahan, and depict him as a despicable creature, whose only concern in life was how to indulge in bestial sensuality and monstrous lewdness. According to them, the frequent fancy bazars in the palace, the maintenance of a large number of dancing girls by the state, the presence of hundreds of male servants in the seraglio, were so many objects for the satisfaction of Shah Jahan's lust.

Manucci says: "It would seem as if the only thing Shah Jahan cared for was the search for women to serve his pleasure." He also writes about the intimacy of Shah Jahan with the wives of Ja'fer Khan and

Khalilullah Khan, and says that it became so notorious that when they went to court the mendicants, in loud voice, cried out to Ja'fer Khan's : "O Breakfast of Shah Jahan, remember us!" And when the wife of Khalilullah Khan went by, they shouted : "O Luncheon of Shah Jahan, succour us!" Bernier remarks that Shah Jahan had a weakness for the flesh. Manrique speaks of Shah Jahan's violating the chastity of the wife of Shayista Khan with the assistance of his daughter. Peter Mundy glibly talks of Shah Jahan's incestuous connexion with his daughter Chamani Begum. Tavernier writes in the same strain.

It is impossible to find confirmatory evidence of these scandals in the works of Indian chroniclers. They may be true, or again they may not. Certain it is that the Moghuls were not monogamous. Shah Jahan himself married three wives ; Jahangir had about a score of them; and Akbar also had many. Waris mentions the names of Akbarabadi Mahal and Fatehpuri Mahal as the two favourite slave-girls of Shah Jahan. It is possible there may have been many more.

But, by far, the most serious charge against Shah Jahan's character is the shocking suggestion that he had improper relations with his daughter Jahan

Ara. On this Dr. Saxena comments as follows : "But what appears as most revolting to all sense of decency is Bernier's allegations that Shah Jahan had incestuous connection with his daughter Jahan Ara. He says: 'Begum Sahib, the elder daughter of Shah Jahan, was very handsome and of lively parts, and passionately beloved by her father. Rumour has it that his attachment reached a point which it is difficult to believe, the justifications of which he rested on the decision of the *Mullas*, or doctors of their law. According to them it would have been unjust to deny the King the privilege of gathering fruit from the tree he had himself planted.' "

Vincent Smith has it that the earliest evidence of this incestuous connection is to be found in De Laet, and that it is confirmed by Thomas Herbert. On the basis of their evidence V. Smith comes to the conclusion that 'the unpleasant accusation against Shah Jahan and his daughter, even if it be not conclusively proved, certainly is not disproved. Although it may be reasonably regarded as improbable, it cannot be dismissed summarily as incredible.' At another place he remarks: 'Although it is undeniable that Shahjahan was excessively devoted to sensual pleasures, and there is reason to believe that his daughter engaged in various illicit amours, it seems almost incredible at first sight that both father and daughter

could have been so utterly depraved as they are alleged to have been, yet similar practices prevail or prevailed, a few years ago, among the puritan Boers of South Africa, who are said to have adduced scriptural warrant for their conduct.'

Thus the testimony of De Laet and Herbert leads V. Smith to a definite conclusion which is strengthened by the assertions of Bernier and Tavernier. By a curious process of reasoning Mr. Smith further determines the time when the crime could have occurred. He places it immediately after the death of Mumtaz Mahal in the Deccan. He further opines that the criminal connexion had ceased by 1658.

And again, "It is, however, strange that an acute observer like Mr. Smith should lightly pass over the categorical assertion of Manucci, who says that Bernier's statement is founded entirely on the talk of low people. Moreover, his reflections on the nature of Bernier's testimony are interesting. He observes that '(Bernier) puts many things of his own into the Moghul history...He writes many things which did not occur...nor could he have been well-informed, for he did not live more than eight years at the Moghul court; it is so very large that there are an infinity of things to observe. Nor could he so observe, because he had no entrance to court.' Regarding all this as



no more than nonsense, Dr. Saxena continues: "The origin of this gossip seems to lie in Shah Jahan's unbounded love for his daughter, who was the eldest of his surviving children. That Jahan Ara equally reciprocated this affection is borne out not only by the evidence of the Indian chroniclers, but also by the assertions of European travellers." Bernier remarks: "Shah Jahan reposed unbounded confidence in this his favourite child; she watched over his safety, and was so cautiously observant that no dish was permitted to appear upon the royal table which had not been prepared under her superintendence." Manucci says that she served her father with the greatest love and diligence.

The opinion of Sir Richard Temple on this subject deserves to be fully quoted. He says: "I look upon the story as an instance of the scandalous gossip about those in high places, which has only too often been handed down as Indian history; in this case, to account for the great favours publicly showered on Jahan Ara by her fond and notoriously ill-regulate father; having its root in the common knowledge that the Moghul Emperor's daughters were not allowed to marry for reasons of State." To this may be added the well deserved tribute to Jahan Ara paid by Beale. He says: "(Her) name will ever adorn the pages of history as a bright example of filial attachment, and

heroic self-devotion to the dictates of duty...(She) not only supported her aged father in adversity, but voluntarily resigned her liberty and resided with him during his imprisonment in the fort of Agra."

However, brought together by romance and love, or by policy and diplomacy, or both, all scribes agree that the married life of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz was a model of mutual devotion and faithfulness. For many years the prince now campaigned victoriously on distant battle-grounds and, again, camped in equally distant places, like an exile, or like one in disgrace; but both in the sunshine of glory and under the clouds of seeming ruin, she was always with him. If the wife is like the shadow of a man, always clinging, never separated, then was Mumtaz an ideal, indeed! She was admired universally for her goodness of heart and for her sympathetic and charitable disposition. And she who gave freely to all of her generous and affectionate nature gave, naturally, all of herself to her lord and husband. Understandably, therefore, "her praises were sung by all, and her conduct in every respect warranted the deep and lasting affection of Shah Jahan." She was, indeed, a most lovable woman, and, of Shah Jahan, so deeply loved that very few people know, or care to know, that he had other wives. Generally, it is assumed that Shah Jahan was "that almost, imaginary being of Moham-

madan history, the husband of but one wife," and that

*Of slaves he had many, of wives but one.  
'There is but one God for Soul', he said,  
And but one moon for the sun...*

As is common knowledge, many children were born to this royal couple, fourteen to be exact. And it was in child-birth that the "Most Exalted of the Age" passed away. That was in 1630. Shah Jahan had been on the throne for some years, since 1627, but had not begun to feel settled. The last years of his father's reign had been difficult years for him, since Nur Jahan had turned from being his staunchest ally to becoming his fiercest opponent, and Shah Jahan had to wade through blood to the throne. Some chieftains of the far-flung empire had started regarding themselves as independent, one of these being Khan Jahan Lodi. And it was to put down this rebel that the king had gone South. Mumtaz had accompanied him, as she had done all along their nineteen years of wedded life. But the time for their parting had now come. She died at Burhanpur in the Deccan in giving birth to their fourteenth child, a daughter. It is said that just before her death she heard the cries of the child in the womb and speedily sent for her beloved husband to whom she spoke in the following terms : "Sire, I believe that no mother

has ever been known to survive the birth of a child so heard and I fear that my end is near. O King, I have lived with you in joy and sorrow. God has made you a great Emperor and given you many worlds to rule. And now there are only two things I have to say to you: Do not take another wife, and build me a tomb to make my name memorable." Heart broken as he was, Shah Jahan promised the dying woman that never would any one else supplant her in his palace or his heart, and that he would enshrine her remains in a mausoleum which should be a marvel for all ages to come, such as none had ever seen before and which should be the most beautiful of all tombs in the whole wide world. With these passion-hot words of her grief-mad husband ringing in her ears, Mumtaz passed away, leaving behind an inconsolable king, and a whole kingdom plunged in gloom. This was in 1630, the date of her death being 7th June. The *hizri* year is 1040 as the single-word chronogram, *gham*, indicates. This should correspond to the year 1630 of the christian era, but some historians have erroneously placed the event in 1631. There is divergence also in respect of the date calculated; some mention 7th, others 17th.

Before we pass on to a consideration of how the emperor and empire mourned the loss of the Lady of the Taj and how a royal husband kept his word,



let us pause to reflect awhile over these two great elements of human life, love and death, and see how the former reacts to the latter. If the legendary account of the death-scene given above which writers of romantic fiction would make us accept as authentic, be regarded as such, then the two requests of Mumtaz show that she must have given of herself greatly to ask of the king so lavishly. For, only those who have the heart to give wholly will have the courage to demand all, and take all. And Shah Jahan must have loved her dearly not only to have fulfilled after her death the desire she had expressed, but at all to have let her feel that she might freely ask him for so much almost as a matter of her rights over him. This is a wonderful thing and one which does great credit to the king. Of course, there is a lot to be said for the self-effecting, humble, all-surrendering love as depicted in that well-known song of Christina Rossetti:

*When I am dead, my dearest,  
Sing no sad songs for me;  
Plant thou no roses at my head,  
nor shady cypress tree:  
Be the green grass above me  
with showers and dewdrops wet:  
And if thou wilt, remember,  
And if thou wilt, forget.*

Yet, here there were no 'if thou wilts', but express

demand that she be remembered, for she, Mumtaz, would not have said:

*I shall not see the shadow,  
I shall not feel the rain;  
I shall not hear the nightingale  
Sing on as if in pain;  
And dreaming through the twilight  
That doth not rise nor set,  
Haply I may remember,  
And haply may forget.*

She would be remembered, and wanted shady cypress trees and roses and a beautiful tomb where she would wait—no 'haply' about her remembering him either—for her lord. The parting between them was but temporary, providing as it were, but time to Shah Jahan to build that other palace, of death, for her and for him which all these Tartar kings were so passionately fond of building. In this case, Shah Jahan combined with this passion of the race that of the individual lover who would keep green and for ever the memory of his beloved wife. A poet like Shakespeare might make virtue of a necessity and since he could not build in aught except black ink and rhyme, he might wisely point out that sad mortality was likely to o'ersway stone also. But kings can build in stone and marble, and when there is a will to it, have built well. Witness the monuments

which have withstood the ravages of time. Luckily for us Shah Jahan's ruling passion was architecture, and he loved to build in marble and precious stones, as a fabulous Mughal emperor like him needs must. Rarely have the stars been in such favourable conjunction for great building as was the case with Taj Mahal. A king's beloved and wife dying, and not only leaving him sorrow-laden but expressing a dying wish, a last desire, for a fabulous tomb: and the king a lover of buildings, out already to lavish all his care and wealth on grandiose constructions; and to hand for the project, the riches and resources and the artistic genius of about the most glamorous and astoundingly wealthy kingdom in Indian history! Naught else could have been wished for; the result should have been obvious, even before the thought began to take shape. Any one might have guessed that Mumtaz Mahal would get a tomb, however long it might take to rise, which should be more than what she had desired. The Taj was bound to be a marvel, as inevitably as every full moon is.

To revert, however, to the story of the dying queen and her sorrowing husband. Possibly the requests attributed to her were never made by Mumtaz, or if they were, they might as well have been counsels of prudence rather than commands of love, since taking another wife—some historians maintain that the request was that the king should not beget

children from any other wife—might mean step-brothers of her own sons which would cause strife for succession; and, to build a tomb is to think of death, which often helps one to keep sane and earnest about the business of life. Both the versions are vouched for by authority. The popular account about her requests is found in a rare Persian manuscript—the autobiography of Ali Afridi, affixed to his *dewan*—and in a manuscript treatise on the Taj. Abdul Hamid Lahori, the contemporary historian, on the other hand, describes the death-scene but barely:

“When the Begum learnt that her death was certain, she sent the Princess Jahan Ara to call the Emperor to her. He at once arrived in great concern and sorrow. She commended her sons and her mother to his care and then set out on her last journey.”

However that be, there is little doubt that Shah Jahan was exceedingly unhappy and an unprecedented state-mourning was ordered. The king could not bear to attend to the business of the state and declined even to appear at the *Jharoka* for the time-honoured convention of letting the populace see their ruler. The white dress—sign of sorrow in the East—was donned by the Court, and, as if to outpace all else in respect of mourning the great loss, Shah Jahan's hair turned grey overnight. But for the fact that he regarded kingship a matter of sacred obligation, he would have



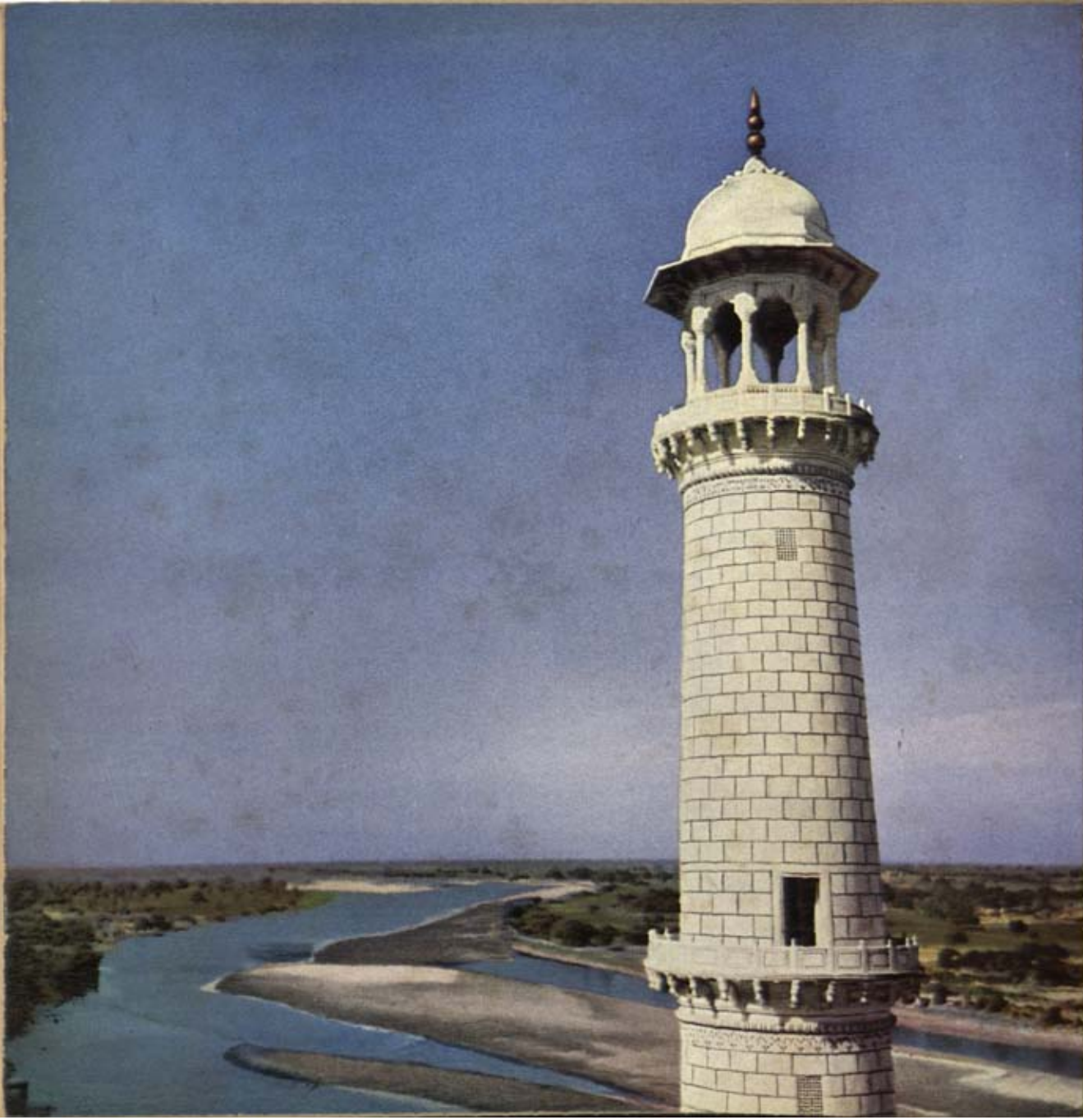
abdicated the throne, and become a recluse. Nevertheless, for two years he lived like one, shunning music and dance, avoiding all pleasure, finding delight in nothing except the thought of his departed beloved and actively interested in one thing only: her tomb. On this and on the task of designing and building it, he brought to bear his attention almost as soon as the first shock was over, and bent all his energies when he returned to Agra. This happened six months after the death of the empress during which period her body remained buried in a temporary grave in Burhanpur, in a building in the garden of Zainabad across the river Tapti. Thence it was brought to the Capital, being attended, on the way, by Mumtaz's faithful companion and secretary, Sati-un-nissa and escorted by Prince Shuja. In Agra itself, a suitable site was sought out and, as custom ordained, paid for, the place finally selected being a large plot of land situated on the bank of the river Yamuna and belonging to Raja Jai Singh. Here the precious

remains of the dead queen were deposited for permanent rest, and here, over these, rose the glorious tomb which was to make her name immortal, even as she had wished. Crores of rupees were spent, and for a score of years, a score of thousands worked day and night before the great, glimmering tomb began to reflect the light of the sun and the moon and the stars in some secret signals from earthly beauty to the heavenly. But the faith of the builders never wavered, and while inch by inch their hammers cut and chiselled through lumps of marble, they knew all along that beauty walked behind their work, that they were creating, for the dead queen who had expressly asked for it, and for the living king whose eyes and heart were for ever focussed only on this building, something on which generations to come will look, and wonder, and exclaim: This is not architecture but magic. But of this matter, of architecture as well as of not architecture, we shall speak in the next chapter.



**CHAPTER** 3





## A Miracle of Architecture

*Not Architecture, as all others are,  
But the proud passion of an Emperor's love  
Wrought into living stone, which gleams and soars  
With body of beauty shining soul and thought . . .*

EDWIN ARNOLD

"MY SECOND PRAYER IS THAT YOU should build over me such a mausoleum that the like of it may not have been seen anywhere else in the world." Thus, as we have observed already, Mumtaz Mahal to Shah Jahan before her death. Obviously, constructing such a marvellous monu-

ment was no joke. To erect a tomb which should fulfil the bold request of the dying queen and realise the dream of the bereaved emperor—this was a stupendous task. Even to conceive something unique, to produce on paper a blue-print which would please and satisfy that king of builder kings, Shah Jahan,



must have been a great achievement. Sketch after sketch must have been put forth by artist after artist before the exacting standards and the exquisite taste of the emperor would permit that a wooden model be prepared. According to a rather macabre legend which, nevertheless, is quite in keeping with the character of autocrats, generally, and the Mughals, those descendants of the Tartars, in particular, plan after plan submitted by his chief designer having failed to come up to his idea of the thing, the king hit upon a device which yielded the desired result. It was ordered that the artist's beloved be beheaded (or, according to another version, be put in the prison) so that he might experience what sorrow is, what separation is, and, so, might be inspired by the poignant emotion of a love-steeped, grief-stricken soul into devising the structure Shah Jahan wanted. Let us hope that all this is fable and fiction fit only for films on the theme, and no more. Yet masterpieces are mostly made in that way, and the world's beauty springs, not unoften, from bleeding hearts. Only when suffering and pain have scraped fat and frivolity off the soul, will the goddesses of art and beauty and thought deign to bless human endeavour. At any rate, he who would invoke the sombre spirit of sorrow to inspire him into visualising a unique tomb for the queen of an emperor commanding the fabled wealth of 'Ind needs must be familiar with the ardour of

passion as well as the anguish of separation. The fact that the Indian craftsmen were able to translate the desire of Mumtaz Mahal and the dream of Shah Jahan into reality, to fulfil her wish and his command literally, is a great tribute to the architectural genius of the Mughals. What finally emerged was indeed something the like of which the world had not seen, is something about which common visitors and seasoned critics alike agree that it is beyond the pale of art, that it might well have been a monument fashioned in paradise and set one day by angels and fairies on the spot it occupies. What Arnold said about its being no architecture but a king's passion and all that might be regarded as a pretty, poetic conceit, but the comment of an architect like Lutyen, the maker of New Delhi, cannot be dismissed that lightly. "It is wonderful but not architecture", he said once, and added, ".....its beauty begins where architecture ceases to be." We have already seen how its superb loveliness could make a woman say that she would die the next day to have such a tomb over her. That this is no hyperbole is borne out by the comment of much-travelled travellers and of scholars and philosophers and art-critics of repute. The palace-complex, which serves as the casket to the jewel of the tomb-building proper, as well as the Taj itself are so effectively designed and built that to many people they represent the very acme of artistic achieve-

ment. If the word unique and the term absolute are deserved by any earthly monument, then there is little doubt that the Taj merits them. As we shall see, this marvel in marble was not made in a day. Immense expense and untold labour, unflinching devotion and dedication to the task by tens of thousands of workers, the personal interest of an exceptionally gifted king invested to an amazing and unprecedented extent—all this, on the one hand, and a tradition of art of building which had learnt to combine the finest in the Indian style and in the Islamic, on the other, went into the construction of this wonder of the world. It is strange that a structure should be perfectly rational, with every inch and aspect of it easily recognisable as belonging to this existing monument or that, and yet it should be like the vision of ideal beauty, should be, in the phrase quoted in an earlier chapter, “the most absolute work of art.” Indeed, such is the perfection of this lovely shrine—which enshrines, in the opinion of many, not merely the remains of Mumtaz Mahal but all the grace and beauty of womanhood—that Byron’s description of perfection given in his *She Walks In Beauty* might well be applied to it:

*One shade the more, one ray the less,  
Had half impair’d the nameless grace.*

This nameless grace, and its secret, are emphasised

in a great and noble tribute by Keyserling in his *Philosopher’s Travel Diary*:

“And what is it which conditions its unique quality? It is the accumulated effect of many details; it is the existence of shades which we should never credit with the capacity for signifying so much. The general plan of the Taj Mahal is shared by hundreds of Indian mausoleums, whose effect is perfectly indifferent; its chromatics have been imitated a hundred times, with no better result than that the buildings thus decorated give the impression of a wedding cake. Let us transpose ever so slightly the proportions, or change its dimensions by an iota, or use a different material; or place the Taj Mahal, as it is, into another region which is subjected to different conditions of air, damp and light; it would be the Taj Mahal, no longer. I have seen the same white marble used for mosques not a hundred miles distant from Agra: it lacks the enamel-like quality of the Taj Mahal. This work of art makes particularly clear what the nature of individuality really is. No matter how many causes and relations we establish: the essential escapes us; if some apparently insignificant circumstance disappears, the nature of the subject seems immediately transformed. This says little in favour of the metaphysical reality of the individual; how could anything be metaphysically real



which is manifestly so dependent upon empirical circumstances? It proves on the other hand, however, the absolute nature of the phenomenon. This is intrinsically unique, not to be traced to anything else or anything external. And sometimes, when I am in a platonic mood, I incline to the belief that phenomena may thus far participate of metaphysical reality. A certain aspect of the eternal spirit can only become visible subject to special empiric conditions. These conditions, as such, are not intrinsic, and they exhaust the individual elements. The spirit, however, which animates the phenomenon exists in itself, no matter or how it is expressed. Thus the original image of the Taj Mahal may have decorated from eternity the world of ideas." Matching this metaphysical approach is the other one that the beautiful figure of Venus-de-Milo was always there in the marble slab out of which the sculptor carved it, or that the blank paper and black ink which Shakespeare used were all the time pregnant with the poetry and passion of his plays. In practice, however, every millimetre of the Taj had to be planned and chiselled. In any case, it was not all metaphysics; knowledge of the craft and patience and a great many other things are required for producing works of art. Whistler explained this well during the famous case arising out of Ruskin's jibe that the artist had flung a pot of paint in the face of the public, had called it a painting and charged a

thousand guineas for it. When cross-examined as to how much time he had taken to paint the picture in question, he had replied that the actual time taken was no factor for determining the charges. Even as a barrister charged not for the time for which he appeared but for the qualifications, gifts, talents, experience and all that goes in the name of capacity and learnedness and preparation for all able performance, so one had to be born with a Whistler's gift for painting and to have all the years of hard life and harder training before the work of art in question could have been produced in the time it actually took for its technical execution. This is true of all great achievement in any field. Capacity and conditioning count and count a great deal. And pleasant as is to believe that God said 'Let there be light', and there was light, the evolutionists do not accept such fairy tales. The flowering tree that we may see for the first time was not produced in an instant by magic but went through the normal process of planting and sprouting and growth and development. Similarly for those who see it all ready there, the Taj might have been made by the architect of heaven and, like Venus from the waves, sprung miraculously from the cypress-studded soil it adorns. In fact, the Taj had to be thought out, and built, and what is more, could have been built only when it was built—at the end of a long and triumphant tradition of art and architecture

of which it became the consummation and culmination.

Historians and art-critics generally look at the stream of history or the development of a country's art and architecture as if the process were not a continuous and integrated activity. Ages and phases are worked out and instead of accepting the interwoven string of many colours as one single entity, an attempt is made to separate the threads and to examine them as if the end-product belonging to any given period could have been achieved without a synthesis of the various constituents. At times this is done out of genuinely limited vision, but not unoften from mischievous intent. All the same the picture gets distorted and falsified. Let us make this point clear. India of today, for instance, is neither more nor less than the India of yesterday. It cannot be, just cannot be, Hindu-India as it was prior to the influx of the Mohammedans or Muslim-India of the pre-British times or for that matter British-India before Freedom dawned. Each era stemmed from and was intimately affected by the previous stage of the story or phase of development. This applies equally to what went before the so-called Hindu-India so that one cannot ignore the various trends, tendencies, influences, ideas, ideals and flaws, which were associated with Buddhism or Jainism, the Vedic period, the Aryan

culture, the Indus-Valley Civilization, nor all that was taking place at these various times, in the other regions of the countries which are not covered by the items enumerated above. Indeed, the various impacts and influences which were reaching the country by one means or another from the rest of the world should also be duly assessed in the context of the total picture. Thus, any Indian of today who thinks of his life and country in terms of old and now untenable beliefs, values and achievements, deceives himself; for he is cherishing the unpardonable illusion that these could have existed in vacuum, unaffected wholly by the inter-play of other, more or less equally valid, beliefs, values and achievements.

This rather long digression is germane to an important point which we wish to consider—that of the place of the Taj in Mughal architecture and of Mughal architecture itself in the total tradition of Indian architecture. It is obvious that if two individuals live together for some time, they cannot but be affected and influenced, whether for better or for worse, by each other. Similarly it is unthinkable that one distinct culture can come in contact with another, whether through clash and conflict or through open-armed acceptance, and the two should fail to register any effect or reaction one upon the other. On the Hindu-India existing up to the tenth century, the



Muslim hordes descended with vigour and strength, and the Rajputs having been defeated, the rule of the Mohammedans was established. As we know one of the first things which the Muslim conquerer put up to mark his triumph was the great tower of victory called the Qutb Minar. Cheek by jowl to this tremendous tower lies the Quwuttul Islam Mosque which, as is well-known, involved re-conversion of several Jain and Hindu temples into a Muslim house of worship. Upon the pillars of this structure one can still see the carvings which betray the original character of these components. Already the process of using and borrowing that which is available and combining it with that which the conquerers brought with them as their own knowledge, skill and heritage, is in evidence. The Indian workers were put to constructing these things and commonsense will tell us that it was not possible to train these workers into a completely new type of artists overnight by the touch of some magic wand. The instructions and the intentions of the builders were carried out. New features were introduced, the figure work was wholly left out and the *tughra* inscription and letter decoration, was ever so elegantly and impressively amalgamated with the rest. What emerged was indicative of the fact that two great cultures and traditions had met, each possessing something which the other lacked, each offering something of value to the

other, and showing that once the prejudices could be discarded by both sides, there was possibility of achieving something which would be new, full of greater life and energy, likely to endure, better. Alas! as it often happens in the history of unfortunate countries, there was more clash and confusion for some centuries than understanding and co-operation. The Muslim himself became more and more self-conscious. In the field of art and architecture, particularly, attempts were made to differentiate rather than give-and-take. The Pathan style of architecture, solid but stupid-looking, radiating strength but lacking refinement, rudimentary in concept and appearance even though not crude, bears out the above remark. Even the best of structures, say, a Lodi or Tughlk tomb or a Masjid Kalan at Delhi, which are important landmarks in the story of development and are good examples of what they stand for, make nobody get lost in wonder, and one finds little to write home about when contemplating these little vanities of little kings. It is only when we come to the Mughal period, when the social set-up begins to show a new harmony between Islam and Hinduism—thanks to the efforts first of men like Guru Nanak or Kabir, Khusrū or the Muslim saints of Ajmer and Delhi, and, later, through those of a king like Akbar—that we see a genuinely new product, representing the two styles and traditions of art and architecture



which were hitherto associated separately with the Hindu or the Mohammadan. This we find not in the time of Babur who did not live beyond a few years as the emperor of India and who, in any case, despised the land as well as its people, including, incidentally, all the Muslims who had now been living in this country for more than four hundred years; nor in the time of Humayun who spent a major portion of his reign, if reign it can be called, as a fugitive away from India; but during the age of Akbar the Great, who went all out from true wisdom to bring about unity between the two major races inhabiting the subcontinent. Both from policy and in keeping with his vision of a greater India, he sought matrimonial alliances with the Rajputs and befriended this warrior class, and set about learning and imbibing all the good things which Hindu thought, culture, religion and art possessed. As is well known he even tried to institute a new faith, *Deen-i-Ilahi*. Though he failed in that, he succeeded, to an amazing degree, in every other sphere. The result was a great and gracious period of rule which is still remembered as an age of peace and plenty and progress. In the field of architecture the mausoleum of Humayun, elegant but Islamic, was followed by structures at Fatehpur Sikri some of which unmistakably bear the impress of Hinduism. Not one but several buildings of this great city-cum-palace complex, which is Fatehpur

Sikri, are wholly Hindu in character. So is the Jahangiri-Mahal in Agra fort. The other structures of the reign of Akbar are amalgams, in varying degree, of the two traditions. This healthy and happy trend continued during the reign of Jahangir who did not, however, go in for much architectural activity. The mausoleum of Akbar shows a great deal of the best which is Islamic but incorporates a few elements of that which is Hindu or as some would like to put it Buddhist-*Vihar* style. That gem of a building called the tomb of Etmad-ud-daula, which reflects truly the phenomenal grace of Nur Jahan who built it to the memory of her father, is a curious attempt at a throw-back to the wholly Islamic, rather to that middle phase in which the Afgan structures were put up, so that its squattiness is not wholly pleasing, and it is surprising that the grandeur of Akbar's Buland Darwaza at Fatehpur Sikri and the tall minars of Sikan-dara reflecting truly the conception and work of a towering man should be missing from this carven jewel. The explanation usually given is that Nur Jahan intended this tomb to be a large silver casket and changed her mind only when she was told that it would be too expensive even to be afforded by the queen empress so that marble became the material instead of silver. All the same, the element of decoration which went into the making of this mausoleum and the change-over from sandstone to marble in



respect of material were important constituents of the pattern which was evolving gradually but surely for a building like the Taj. Like many a really great achievement all over the world, the Taj was to be the culmination of a long period of experimentation and evolution, the amalgamation of many different variations on the same theme, and was to stand at the end of several mausoleums put up on the soil of India by the Muslims viz., the Lodi tombs, Humayun's mausoleum at Delhi, Khan Khanna's tomb, Akbar's mausoleum at Sikandara, Etmad-ud-daula's mausoleum at Agra and Ibrahim II's 'Taj Mahal' at Bijapur. The Muslim architecture itself was deeply influenced, affected and moulded by Hindu traditions. It is in this sense that it is both customary and correct to state and maintain that the Taj is not an Islamic structure but an Indian achievement.

As with the celebrated case of Shakespeare's works about the writing of which there are several theories, including the well-known view that Bacon wrote Shakespeare, it is fast becoming a fashion to question whether the Taj was really built by Shah Jahan. It is amazing, indeed, that arguments and counter-arguments of various sorts should have been preferred claiming that the Taj was designed by Europeans, or again, that it was a Hindu building—a palace-complex belonging to Rajput Raja Jai Singh—which

was converted into the mausoleum for Shah Jahan's deceased queen. The European-architect theory has been, of course, by now exploded, so that nobody today seriously maintains that the plan for the mausoleum was prepared by the Italian Veroneo or that the entire work of *petra-dura* ornamentation should be attributed to the Frenchman, Austin-de-Bordeaux. Indeed no serious critic, European or non-European, is any longer interested in making these claims and all that is asked for and generally allowed is that Veroneo was a jeweller of some worth and was commissioned to make ornaments for the royal ladies. Surely, a jeweller can hardly be expected to prepare a plan for a mausoleum which in grandeur and loveliness surpasses the buildings of Italy itself—considering especially that the Italians were such great builders. It also stands to reason that had Veroneo been that intimately and so creditably associated with the construction of this magnificent structure, contemporary European travellers and writers like Peter Mundy,—who incidently makes a mention of Veroneo in connexion with a brief journey they made together in the company of some others from Agra on to the road to Fatehpur Sikri—Thevenot and Tavernier would most certainly have mentioned, nay, underscored the fact. Similarly the *petra-dura* work was not something which had not been tried earlier. The Muslim workers as well as the Hindu



knew the art and had practised it earlier. This does not mean that Veroneo or Bordeaux could not have been employed for some work or the other connected with the decoration of the Taj or for some job commissioned by royalty. But all this would amount to so little that, as we have observed earlier, any serious refutation of claims made as to European collaboration is not required. And yet, now and again, European writers continue to make these claims—in such an innocent-seeming manner that one does not know whether to re-open the issue or to ignore their sweeping remarks. For example, in the annotations to the photographs published under the title *Indian Temples*, Odette Monod-Bruhl says of the Taj Mahal plates: "This famous tomb, built (1632-43) by Shah Jahan in memory of his young wife, rises with its slender minarets in the midst of magnificent gardens, where pools and basins reflect the dazzling white of its marble walls. It is the result of collaboration between Indian, Turkish and European artists, who used only the rarest stones in their restrained decoration—porphyry, agate, lapis lazuli and cornelian."

Note how quietly, how authoritatively, how taken-for-grantedly the 'European' is fitted in. Obviously critics and authorities intend to persist in believing such moonshine. We shall, therefore, round

off our own remarks with quotations from a few authorities so as to seal off this issue of the European collaborations. Percy Brown writes: "The broad conception of this unique memorial can only be attributed to the imaginative mind of Shah Jahan himself, but who was the genius entrusted with the work of translating his ideal into such a perfection of architectural accomplishment, has been a matter of some controversy. Much of the uncertainty as to the author of this building has been occasioned by a categorical assertion recorded by Father Sebastian Manrique, a Spanish Augustinian friar, Visitor of this Order in the East, that the architect was a Venetian jeweller and silversmith named Geronimo Veroneo, who drew a large salary as court artist to the Mughal emperor. On the other hand contemporary manuscripts have been preserved purporting to give full details of its construction including the names of the chief artificers, from which it becomes clear that the work throughout was wholly indigenous, no mention being made of European intervention of any kind. In support of the purely oriental constitution of this building, and to the student of the style a factor more conclusive than any documentary evidence, is the character of the monument itself, which shows in all its aspects that it was the logical evolution of the building art as practised by the Mughuls, true to tradition and entirely free from any external



influence. A possible explanation of the alleged Italian attribution, which, in spite of the standing testimony of the buildings still persists, may be that the Venetian craftsman was invited, with others, to submit designs, but the one prepared by the indigenous master-builders was that eventually selected."

Briggs, as great an authority as any on the whole subject of saracenic architecture, comments as follows: "The frequently quoted statement that the architect was an Italian has been denied by some historians. It is not incredible, though insufficiently documented, and may be a legend invented by those who consider the design of the building so marvellous that they wish to find a non-Hindu authorship for it. Admittedly it is the greatest work of the Mughals, but it is a natural growth from the tomb of Humayun and to a less extent from certain others. But it is far superior to any of them in the dignity of its grouping and disposition, in the masterly contrast between the central dome and the slender minarets, in the chaste refinement and pains-taking craftsmanship of its details, and above all in the splendour of its materials. The design is more Persian and less Indian than any building we have encountered hitherto, yet nothing quite like it is to be found in Persia." Finally, here is Havell who has written at length about this question. "The want of understanding of Indian art

which until recently has been universal in Western criticism has led many to give willing credence to vague suggestions that a monument so unique and beautiful could not have been created by Indian builders. These prepossessions are supported by a definite statement recorded by a Spanish Augustinian Friar Father Manrique, who visited Agra in 1640 when the Taj was still unfinished, by which the credit for it has been fastened on an Italian adventurer in Shah Jahan's service, one Geronimo Veroneo, who died at Lahore shortly before Father Manrique's arrival, and told his story to a Jesuit priest. Italian adventurers are always credited with abnormal artistic gifts, and his improbable story has been too lightly accepted as proof outweighing all contemporary Indian accounts and most important of all the testimony of the Taj itself. A number of contemporary accounts written in Persian give a detailed list of the chief craftsmen and agree in placing first Master (Ustad) 'Isa, or Muhammad 'Isa Effendi, described as the "best designer (or draftsman) of his time". The list includes a dome builder, 'Ismail Khan Rumi; two specialists for building the pinnacle surmounting the dome; mastermasons from Delhi, Multan, and Kandahar; a master carpenter from Delhi; calligraphists from Shiraz, Baghdad, and Syria; inlay workers who were all Hindus from Kanauj, and a Hindu garden designer from Kashmir, Ustad 'Isa's

native place is given variously as Agra, Shiraz and Rum (European Turkey). The Turkish title of Effendi which is given him in some MSS, proves nothing as to nationality; and regarding the other foreign craftsmen, one would have to know something of their family history to determine whether they were Indian or not. The so-called Turks may have been Indian craftsmen in the service of the Otto-man Sultan, or of the Sultans of Bijapur who had Turkish ancestry.

"It is said that Shah Jahan, in consultation with his experts, saw drawings of all the chief buildings of the world—a statement not to be taken too literally and that when the design was settled a model of it was made in wood. Veroneo appears to have been present at these consultations, and he declared afterwards that he had finished the design which met with the Padshah's approval. The silence of the detailed native accounts on this point, and of all contemporary writers besides Father Manrique, would have little significance were it not for the silence of the Taj itself. It must be inconceivable to any art critic acquainted with the history of the Indian building craft, that Shah Jahan, if he had so much faith in a European as an architect, would only have used him to instruct his Asiatic master builders in designing a monument essentially Eastern in its whole conception, or that Veroneo himself would have submitted

a design of this character and left no mark of his European mentality and craft experience upon the building itself. Shah Jahan was professedly a strict Sunni, and probably at the instigation of Mumtaz Mahal, who, like Nur Jahan, wielded unbounded influence over the Emperor, he had renewed the destruction of Hindu temples which had ceased entirely during the reign of his father and grandfather. He had broken down the steeple of the Christian Church at Agra, and would hardly have outraged Muhammedan orthodoxy and the memory of his beloved wife by employing a Christian as the chief designer of a tomb which was to be peerless in the world of Islam. There is not the least evidence that Veroneo's position at the court was that of a builder or architect. Nearly all Europeans in the Mughul imperial service were artillerymen, and it was probably in that capacity that he enjoyed Shah Jahan's favour. Father Manrique's story is not corroborated by any other contemporary writer. Tavernier and Bernier both allude to the building of the Taj, and they would certainly have given a European the credit due to him if they had heard and believed the tale.

"Moreover, the idea that Indian builders of the seventeenth century worked, in the modern European fashion, after measured drawings prepared beforehand by the chief architect, and that the faultless



curves of the central dome betray the mind and hand of a foreigner, is altogether wide off the mark. They worked then, as they do now, after a general idea based upon traditional practice. When the general idea had been settled by Shah Jahan, the execution of it would have been left in the hands of expert advisers, and the dome built by dome builder would be the latter's own creation, not a precise copy of a paper pattern or model set before him. So if Veroneo was so deeply versed in Indian craft tradition that he could design a lotus dome after the rules laid down in the Shilpa Shastras, the dome itself, built by Asiatic craftsmen, would not have been his."

This is not exactly the place to go on with Havell in his examination of the structure of the dome and study his contention that Bijapur's buildings and craftsmen had a great deal to do with the building of the Taj. But with him it is just a digression and he gets back to the question of the European's contribution. Let us, therefore, go the whole hog with him and have done with this matter. We quote Havell again :

"The building of the Taj commenced soon after Mumtaz Mahal's death in childbirth, and lasted nearly twenty-two years. Ibrahim II, the Shia Sultan of Bijapur, had died five years before its commence-

ment, and the splendid mausoleum which he had raised to the memory of his favourite daughter, Zohra Sultana, and his wife, Taj Sultana, was probably still under construction when Shah Jahan was afflicted by the loss of his beloved Mumtaz Mahal. Ibrahim's Taj Mahal must have been then the latest wonder of the Mussalman world, and certainly it was keenly discussed by Shah Jahan and his builders. The dome of the Taj at Agra is the best proof of that, or it might have been built by the same mason who built the dome of Ibrahim's tomb. Both are constructed on the same principles; they are of nearly the same dimensions, and a fact unnoticed by Fergusson and his followers the contours of both correspond exactly, except that the lotus crown of the Taj at Agra tapers more finely and the lotus petals at the springing of the dome are inlaid, instead of sculptured, in accordance with the whole scheme of decoration.

"Naturally, in the general idea of the monument Shah Jahan preferred to follow his own family traditions, rather than those of the Bijapur dynasty, and the Sunni propriety of his great grandfather's tomb at Delhi no doubt appealed to him. The florid sculpture of the Shia Sultan's tomb was too suggestive of Akbar's catholic tastes; but he could easily excel in the richness of the materials used, for Shah Jahan



was the richest monarch in the world, and was prodigal in the spending of his wealth. Nur Jahan's and Mumtaz's fancy for the quasi jewelled marble dictated the choice of material and process of decoration. Shah Jahan's Hindu craftsmen with cunning hands made the most brilliant pietra dura work in the Persian style, carefully avoiding offence to Sunni prejudices. In the lovely pierced trellis work which filled the windows and formed the screen with which the cenotaphs were enclosed it is likely that Bijapur craftsmen were also employed. Bijapur after Ibrahim's death could not hold its own politically against the Mughal power, and lost its prestige as a great building centre, while the magnificence of Shah Jahan's building project lured the best craftsmen towards Agra and Delhi. The Taj Mahal is, in fact, exactly such a building as one would expect to be created in India of the seventeenth century by a group of master builders inheriting the traditions of Buddhist and Hindu building, but adapting them to the taste of a cultured orthodox Mohammadan monarch who had all the wealth of India at his disposal. The plan, which consists of a central domed chamber surrounded by four smaller domed chambers, follows the traditional plan of an Indian pancharatna, or 'five-jewelled' temple. Its prototype, as I have shown elsewhere, is found in the Buddhist temple of Chandi Sewa in Java, built more than five centuries

earlier, and in the sculptured stupa shrines of Ajanta. Neither Shah Jahan nor his court builders, much less an obscure Italian adventurer, can claim the whole merit of its achievement. The Taj Mahal follows the rule of all the great architectural masterpieces of the world in not being a thing of will, or design, or of scholarship, but a discovery of the nature of things in buildings, a continuous development along the same line of direction imposed by needs, desires, and traditions."

Now that the European has ceased making any serious claim about the building of the Taj, it is being suggested that it was originally the palace of Maharaja Jai Singh, and that it is a Hindu building transformed into the Muslim tomb as is the case with several other Hindu buildings converted by the Mohammadan conquerors into Muslim monuments. In respect of some buildings such claim is now freely admitted. For example, for structures like the Quwwut-ul-Islam Mosque adjacent to the Qutb in Delhi and the one known as Arhai-din-ka-jhonpra at Ajmer, it is accepted that Hindu or Jain temples were hurriedly done over and made into mosques. But even if there are instances of where such conversion was resorted to, that does not prove that structures at Fatehpur Sikri were not built by Akbar or the Taj Mahal is not Shah Jahan's work. The fact that the



piece of land on which the Taj stands or that there were some earlier structures in that area which originally belonged to Raja Jai Singh, will not amount to much. The labour of twenty-thousand workers stretching through seventeen years cannot be discounted so easily. Had every thing been to hand, and a fully built palace-complex available such tremendous and long-drawn effort would have been pointless. This is not to deny that many Hindu artists were pressed into service nor does any body seriously challenge the contention that by the time the Taj came to be built the style of Muslim architecture in India had undergone a remarkable process of development and synthesis, so that the Taj Mahal is an Indian building. However, there is no justification for claiming that it was a Hindu building—retouched into serving the purpose of a mausoleum. For all the elements and components associated with Hinduism, it does not cease to be an original construction which follows naturally and logically from the Mughal and other architectural achievements in the country. In fact, given Humayun's tomb, Akbar's own grand mausoleum at Sikandra, that ornamental thing which Nur Jahan built to the memory to her great father, Etmad-ud-daula, and, shall we say, that wondrous mausoleum at Bijapur of Sultan Ibrahim and his beloved and queen Taj Sultana, one did not have to seek inspiration from Hindu sources for devising or

constructing the Taj Mahal. Petty as it seems on a writer's part to doubt that others are not being objective in their opinions and assessments, it cannot be denied that for quite some time now men and women have been displaying a tendency, akin at times to a passion, towards claiming that all that is best in the past, has been the achievement of their compatriots or co-believers. The European would have it that everything wonderful in the world goes to his credit and the Asiatic or the African has never done much worth speaking about. The same kind of approach would be in turn shown by the Non-Europeans. Similarly, the Christian, the Hindu or the Muslim, would like to have vicarious pride in earlier achievement which he would claim as the work of people belonging to his own faith. Frankly speaking, one does not always know how to react to all this. In modern times much bigger issues are claiming the attention of man and his future hangs by a slender thread between total extinction on the one hand, and paradisaal prosperity and god-like power on the other. It is ridiculous, even tragic, that against a background demanding urgently that nations must become one mankind and all faiths kneaded into one religion or else man will perish, our little souls continue to be bothered about little things and such subjective treatment thereof. Opinion against opinion, the placing of the site by the side of river Jamuna or the existence

of subterranean apartments or a tunnel linking the palace in the Agra fort with the Taj do not necessarily prove that all the handiwork which goes by the name of the Taj Mahal was Raja Jai Singh's beautiful palace.

Before we close this entire question of 'claims' on the Taj, and get back to the point already made that this masterpiece is a miracle of architecture, we should like to give the Muslim scholarly view as presented by M. Abdullah Chaghatai in his paper on "The Place of the Taj Mahal of India in World Architecture" read in the Asian History Congress (1951). Taking up the salient features of the Taj, he shows that each important component of this unique work is Islamic in character, so that there is little validity for views of people like Havell or Mr. Oak who claim and plead that the Taj is a Hindu monument.

"There has been a long controversy as to whether the dome first appeared in the East or the West. But it is now established the dome existed in the East in very ancient times and that the masonry dome originated in Syria . . . Stupas or topes, dome-like structures of the Buddhist monasteries in India, cannot be compared with the dome, for according to expert architects the dome is constructionally quite different

from the stupas. Though the great protagonist of Hindu art and culture, E. B. Havell pleads that not only was Muslim India influenced by the stupas or bell-shaped drums of India but also the whole of Asia, yet we can confidently assert that the masonry dome which first appeared in Syria gradually became a special and permanent feature of mausoleum construction among the Musulmans. Similarly Mr. Havell also says, 'What the Mihrab was to the Musulmans, the lotus was to the Buddhists and Hindus.' But, as a matter of fact, centuries earlier than the Buddhists, the Egyptians used lotus in every detail of ornament of the largest as well as of the smallest monument. Therefore, Havell's theory of Hindu influence on Muslim art cannot be substantiated.

"The dome of the Taj is double in construction and swelling in shape as that of the Gour-i-Amir, the mausoleum of Amir Timur at Samargand.

"In India the dome made its appearance from the very beginning. Later on it gradually but continuously developed and evolved a distinct and definite characteristic of Muslim architecture all over India. The double dome, though not swelling in shape, first appears in the Lodhi regime at Delhi in the dome of Mian Shaikh Shihabud-Din Taj Khan Sultan Abu



Sa'id built in 1501. After that it also took a swelling outline in the dome of Humayun at Delhi (1565). And both these special features reached their culmination in the Taj at Agra.

"The crypt is a great architectural feature of the Taj and it is worth while to trace its origin, while its particular function concerns a mausoleum. In churches it was employed for the galleries of a catacomb or for the catacomb itself but later on it became a subterranean chapel known as a 'Confession' erected round the tomb of a martyr, or the place of martyrdom. In due course it became a necessary part of tombs and churches. The most important crypt in Italy is perhaps that of St. Mark at Venice. The Musulmans also began to use it as the actual grave chamber for the mausoleums. . . . It subsequently became a special feature of the Mughal mausoleums for the princesses who generally observed pardah perhaps with the idea to keep even their dead bodies in seclusion, so this under-ground chamber was adopted for their actual graves. They called it Sardana.

"The use of emblems or symbols on the points of the spires or cupolas, was first introduced by Christians in their Churches in the form of a cross. The Turks turned it into a crescent in the spires of domes of their religious monuments. After that a cres-

cent began to be popular among the Musulmans. But the golden spire of the dome of the Taj is not without any interest, because just before it terminates into a point, it holds a crescent like the spires of the dome or the Adil Shahi dynasty in Bijapur in the Deccan. Who first introduced this crescent in the spires of the domes? The answer is very simple: the Turks, because they were the first to adopt it as a national symbol. We know that the Adil Shahi Sultans of Bijapur were of Turkish origin, and so were the Mughals.

"Almost all the varieties of architectural decoration and embellishments enrich and adorn the Taj; for instance the mural decoration, decoration in relief either on marble or red stone and pietra dura decoration. But the last dominates all both in quantity and variety by its variegated precious stones inlaid on the white marble all over the monuments, which the visitor immediately observes on the spandrills of the arches of the facades of the Taj and its main entrance. Since long the Persians had this particular variety of decoration, and they used to call it parchin kari which is identical to pietra dura, a term of the Italian origin of the sixteenth century. In India such variety of decoration never existed before the occupation of the Musulmans. It was only they who introduced it first in the Juma Masjid

at Ahmedabad (1410), and then at Mandu in the mausoleum of Hoshang Ghorī (1435). But during the Mughal regime under Shah Jahan it reached its climax particularly at the Taj Mahal, and his other monuments, at Delhi, Lahore, and Agra. Someone has been inspired to remark that the *pietra dura* of the Taj is of Italian origin which is an absolutely wrong attribution. We do not find existence of any foreign artist who would have been invited here for this particular object or would have been credited with the honour of its introduction. The orientalism of the Taj's *pietra dura* decorative motifs, which may also be called conventional arabesques, is a sufficient proof that it is an original Iranian technique introduced here by the Persians. This mode of decoration is quite distinct from the mosaics which are mostly found in Constantinople, Syria, and Jerusalem.

"In short all the special architectural features of the Taj embodied in its double bulbous dome, *pietra dura* decoration to break away the monotony of the all-round white marble, the cylindrical round minarets, underground sepulchral vault and four cupolas round the central dome, collectively give it distinction in world architecture and thus it constitutes a class by itself. Points of resemblance may be found here and there between the Taj and the best specimens of world architecture but this circumstance does not

affect its independence for which it is regarded as unique."

All this may be alright for scholarly disputes but the plain fact is that the Taj is neither a Hindu nor Islamic and certainly not an European building. It is the culmination of the Mughal style of architecture even as the Mughal style of architecture itself is the culmination of the process of synthesis of the Hindu tradition and the Islamic or Persian or Afghan or Turkish of the Middle East. In the making of the Taj, what is Islamic or Persian and how much is Hindu, or 'Indian'—this is a different question. It appears that Goetz is about right when he says that the Taj is Indian in sentiment—since it is airy and light and ethereal and subtle and fragile-looking, rather than solid and strong as the traditional Muslim architecture was—and Saracenic in style and structure. And yet in many other respects, in the matter of its decoration, for instance, or in the finish of the finial over the great dome, and even in respect of the choosing of the site on the bank of holy Yamuna there is evidence of imbibing the indigenous, of borrowing from the art of the Hindus during the intervening centuries. These intervening centuries have a long and interesting story of development. It is not possible within the scope of this chapter to go into all the details of this tale of growth and evolution. We shall,



therefore, indicate the main tendencies and ingredients connected with material, style, structural conventions or decorations and mention the main building which served, so to put it, as the precursors of the Taj.

The Indo-Islamic architecture begins with the conquest of Delhi towards the end of the twelfth century. The early Muslim rulers of Delhi were really Turks and not Pathans. Only the Lodi and Sur dynasties were of Afghan origin. But the nomenclature "Pathan has stuck and is commonly used to denote the style of the entire Pre-Mughal period." Their rule established, the Slave Sultans thought at once of constructing memorials to their victory and might. These Turks were great builders and had a fine architectural instinct. They had brought with them memories of the mosques and minars of Ghazni and had bold ideas. But they had to depend upon the Indian workmen to carry out their designs. This created a distinct Indo-Muslim style of architecture which continued to flourish under the succeeding dynasties right up to Akbar's time. The earliest monuments are "the expression of a victorious, imaginative and semi-barbaric race carried out by the quiet, painstaking experience of their more civilized Subjects." They indicate "adoption and adaptation of Hindu material and style to Islamic themes and require-

ments. In the later buildings more carefully composed plan of designing is evident. Hindu decorative features are developed and elaborated, and combined with true arches and domes rising from pendentives". Examples of this period stretching up to about 1320 A.D. are Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque and the Qutb Minar; Tomb of Altamash; Alai Darwaza and Jamait Khana Mosque at Nizam-ud-din.

Then came the Tughlaqs. They were "the Puritans among architects at Delhi" and cultivated a "severe simplicity of style". In the earlier period of their reign use of local stone or red sandstones and, to a limited extent, of marble dressings and coloured tiles distinguishes the buildings. The walls have a marked slope and there is "a massiveness and clean-cut purity of design." Later on, "the style takes on an air of studied gloom—blank, sloping walls, roughness of construction, squat domes and surfaces of artificially blackened plaster—Ornamentation is none or reduced to a minimum." The mosques are generally built on raised platforms. Examples belonging to this period are Tughlaqabad and Tomb of Tughlaq Shah (Ghiyas-ud-din); Masjid Kalan, Mosque at Kotla Feroz Shah, Hauz Khas Tomb, Begam Pur Mosque and Nizam-ud-din's Tomb.

During the next hundred and fifty years, there is

a definite change. "The architecture of the Sayyads and the Lodis is of a more humanised type. The assurance of conquest and superiority had passed away. Hindu forms and adornment came to be freely used. The pillar and the kiosk were brought into requisition. Stone, marble and encaustic tiles were worked into colour effects. . . . But simple severity confined what it adopted to the place of subsidiary features." Sher Shah Suri built in the main style but the reflected greatness and sternness of his personality single out his buildings. His mosque in Purana Qila is an outstanding creation of this style. At Delhi the 'Pathan' style survived up to the early Mughal time, in the tomb of Adham Khan, Akbar's foster-brother. Important structures of this phase are tombs of Sayyad and Lodi Kings, Sher Shah's mosque at Purana Qila, tomb and mosque of Isa Khan. But the finest example of the architecture of this last phase of the pre-Mughal Indo-Islamic architecture is the mausoleum of Sher Shah at Sahsaram. Havell calls this tomb the "stateliest of funeral monuments" and, in the words of K. T. Shah, it "reveals the character of the man whose last resting place, it is—solid, solemn, severe."

"By this time," the same writer, Shah, says, "the accessories of a funeral edifice had become standardised. Situated almost always in the centre of a walled

garden, often with a magnificent gateway the sanctuary building proper was a square or octagonal structure, in which the dead grandee and his family or friends rested. Lilies bloomed on the sheet of water running at right angles to the sarcophagus on either side, and roses on the banks; while breezes from tall cypresses were supposed to fan the dead while they awaited the call of the Last Trumpet. Once used as a place of internment, sounds of revelry cease to echo through its vaulted roof for evermore; and one after another the mortal remains of those intended by the founder to rest there are brought and interred around him. Perfect silence reigns in the house of Death; and coupled with the quiet beauty of the plan, it makes a most solemn and yet graceful symbol of life and death."

In this process of standardisation of the tomb-architecture, the Deccan had also played as distinguished a part as the North. Indeed, the buildings of Bijapur must be mentioned and praised justly in any serious study of the subject. During the last hundred years of this southern kingdom, before it became a part of the Mughal empire, structures were put up which, in the words of Fergusson, were "as remarkable as those of any of the Muhammadan capitals of India, hardly excepting even Agra and Delhi and showing a wonderful originality of design not sur-



passed by these of such capitals as Jaunpur or Ahmedabad, though differing from those in a most marked degree." In respect of the mausoleum, especially, the remarks of Shah are but just and merited: "The finest example of tomb-building, before the lavish outburst of Mughal aestheticism, is to be found in the South, and notably in Bijapur. The Gujarat tombs,—at Ahmedabad and Sarkhej,—are distinctly of Hindu conception, though the Musalman ideal of utter simplicity obtains in these structures more than anywhere else perhaps." And many an authority, Havell certainly and most emphatically, maintains that the tombs at Bijapur generally, and the Rauza which Ibrahim II built for his wife and daughter, in particular, served as precursors, even as models, for the Taj. His remarks on the subject show also how Hindu features had crept in and got merged with the purely Islamic style, and how a new aesthetic ideal was created: "The architecture of Bijapur was characterised by the fact that the Sultans who were the builders of the city were nearly all of the Shiah sect, and as tolerant towards Hinduism as the Vijayanagar Rajas had been towards Islam, admitting Brahmans into their service and using Maharatti instead of Persian as the official language for revenue administration. Ibrahim II (1580-1606), in whose reign most of the finest buildings of Bijapur were begun, was even suspected of taking part in

Hindu religious ceremonies.

The fact that the 'Adil Shahi dynasty was Turkish may account for the special efforts made by the Bijapur builders in dome-construction. Constantinople was famous throughout the Muhammadan world for the grandeur of its domes, and there was a constant rivalry between Musalman potentates to make their monuments the biggest things on earth, either as regards size or in the costliness of materials and decoration. The Indian craftsmen, put upon their mettle by their Musalman employers, achieved in the tomb of Muhammad 'Adil Shah (1636-1660) a dome approximately as large as that of the Pantheon at Rome, built entirely on Indian constructive principles—scientifically the most perfect in the world and, as Fergusson stated, artistically the most beautiful form of roof yet invented. The principle of its construction was at that time unknown in Europe, but it is found in domes of an earlier date at Bijapur and other parts of India. It is, therefore, extremely unlikely that Ottoman builders had anything to do with the evolution of Bijapur architecture.

The earliest of the great buildings at Bijapur is the royal mosque of 'Ali Adil Shah, built in the last half of the sixteenth century to celebrate the fall of Vijayanagar. It closely resembles the ruined build-

ing now known as the 'Elephant Stables' in the old Hindu city, which was probably built as a mosque for the Muhammadan bodyguard of the Vijayanagar Rajas. 'Ali Adil Shah's successor, Ibrahim II, built the magnificent mausoleum and mosque called after his name as memorials for his favourite daughter and for his wife, Taj Sultana, which was doubtless among the 'famous buildings of the world' discussed by Shah Jahan and his master-builders when the design of the Taj Mahal at Agra was under consideration. The Bijapur monument was built under similar circumstances a few years before Shah Jahan commenced the wonderful memorial to his beloved wife."

The Mughal school begins with Akbar, and the first monument of this great dynasty is the impressive mausoleum of Humayun at Delhi. In a sense, this is a 'foreign' building, and contemporary almost with the tomb of Sher Shah. Havell's comment on this structure as well as his comparison of the tombs of the two political rivals makes interesting reading :

"The most conspicuous mark of foreign influence in Mogul building first appears in the tomb of Humayun built early in Akbar's reign when the government was in the hands of Humayun's devoted friend and general, Bairam Khan. Humayun had won back his throne from which he had been driven

by Sher Shah, with the help of a Persian army. Akbar's mother was Persian, and there is no doubt that Persian craftsmen had a voice in the design of Humayun's mausoleum, though white marble and red sandstone are used as facing materials instead of enamelled tiles. But Humayun's court fashions only had a detrimental effect upon the Indian masonic tradition which had found such noble expression in his Afghan rival's tomb at Sahseram a few years before. The two monuments reveal the character of the men whose remains they cover. Humayun's pompous but uninspired monument shows the 'grand seigneur', if somewhat shallow and capricious, a brave fighter and charming companion, but incapable as a ruler of men; Sher Shah's, the stateliest of funeral monuments, a monarch strong both in war and in peace, a strategist and organiser, iron-fisted and unscrupulous, but a ruler of great constructive ability."

During the four and a half centuries which had intervened between the construction on Indian soil of the first Islamic structures and the building of the Taj Mahal, things had, in a way, come full circle. What obtained in this context at the end of the twelfth century has been summed up by Rawlinson thus : "The Muslim invaders, fanatical bigots though they were, were cultured people, and patrons of art and literature. Mahmud of Ghazni adorned his capital



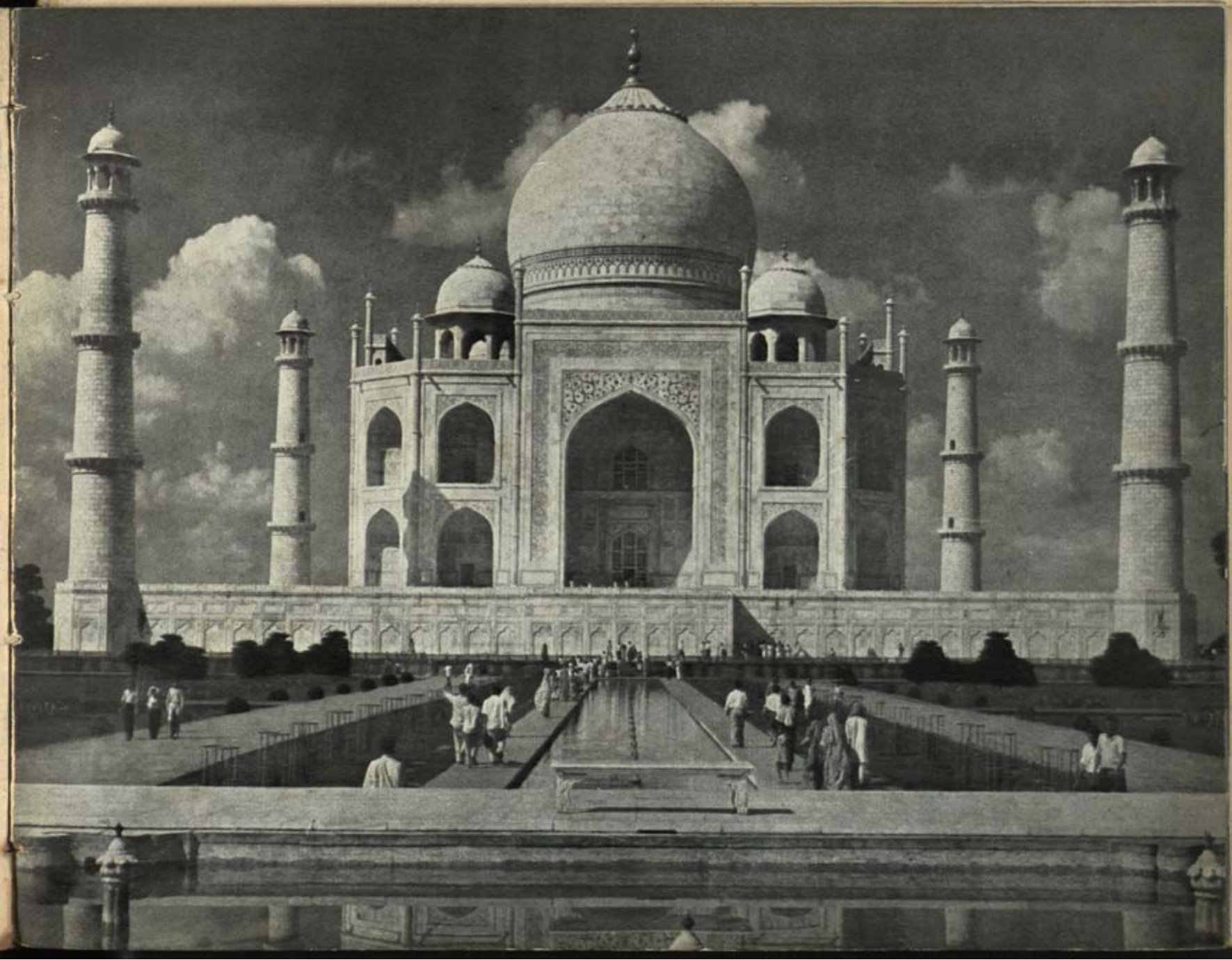
with fine buildings, many of them the work of Hindu craftsmen carried off in his raids.

“The Muslims were not allowed by their religion to practise sculpture, but they made up for it by the elaborate calligraphy which they used to adorn their mosques and tombs with Quranic texts. They introduced into Indian architecture important new elements, the true arch, the dome and the minaret. The result was the evolution of the Indo-Saracenic style, which became characteristic of northern India. For the decoration of their edifices Hindu craftsmen were employed, and materials from Jain and Hindu temples were incorporated.”

The position at the time of the construction of the Taj was essentially the same—and instead of materials, elements from Jain and Hindu structures had by now been incorporated and assimilated in the total tradition of ‘Islamic’ architecture in India, or as an authority like Havell would have it, the Islamic elements were incorporated into the total tradition of Indian architecture. Indeed, he is emphatically of the opinion that not only in India but in other Islamic countries also, it was the Hindu who was the master-craftsman. He has written copiously on this favourite theme of his and we quote a few relevant paragraphs : “Before the Muhammadan conquest

the Indian hereditary builders, whose traditions of technique and design went back in an unbroken line to some of the most ancient cities of the world, had for many centuries borrowed no structural ideas from outside India, but kept strictly to the craft ritual laid down in their own sacred writings. Though it is written in the Silpa-Sashtras that the master-builders should be ‘conversant with all the sciences’, it is probable that, as in the present day, every branch of the Indian craft had become highly specialised, common traditions co-ordinating the different branches and preserving unity of structure of design.

“Many centuries of practice within these lines had developed extraordinary technical skill without exhausting the immense fertility of invention possessed by the Indian craftsmen, when the Muhammadan conquest made a revolutionary change in his hereditary craft practice. Thousands of craftsmen, each expert in his own special branch, were forced into the service of Islam in different parts of Asia and Europe, and set to work indiscriminately at the bidding of their masters. The expert builder of Hindu vimanas might not build a temple spire, but he could design or build the dome of a mosque or tomb equally well. The image-maker might not make images, but he could construct the mihrab of a mosque or carve texts from the Kuran. The painter





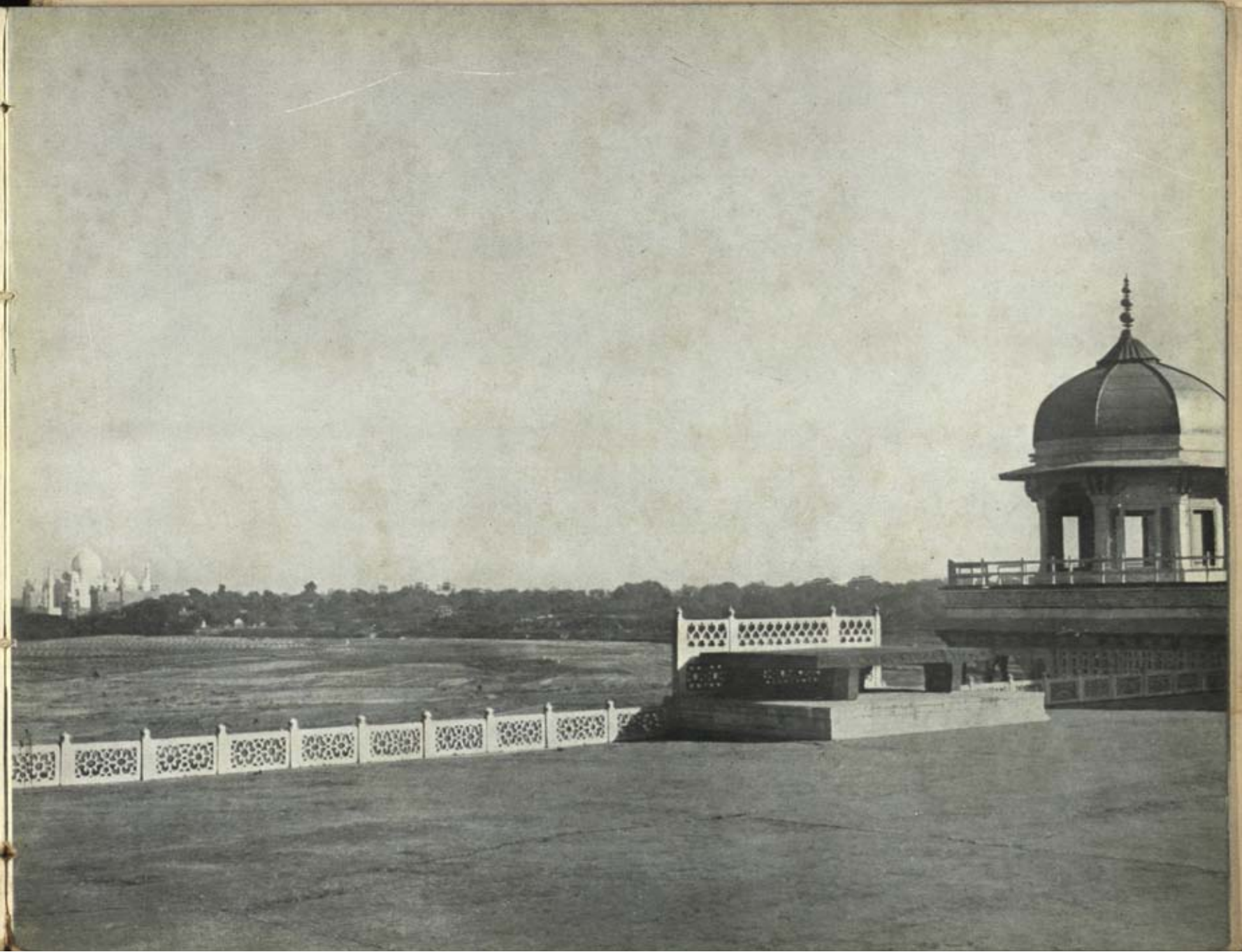


The Lady of the Taj—Mumtaz Mahal

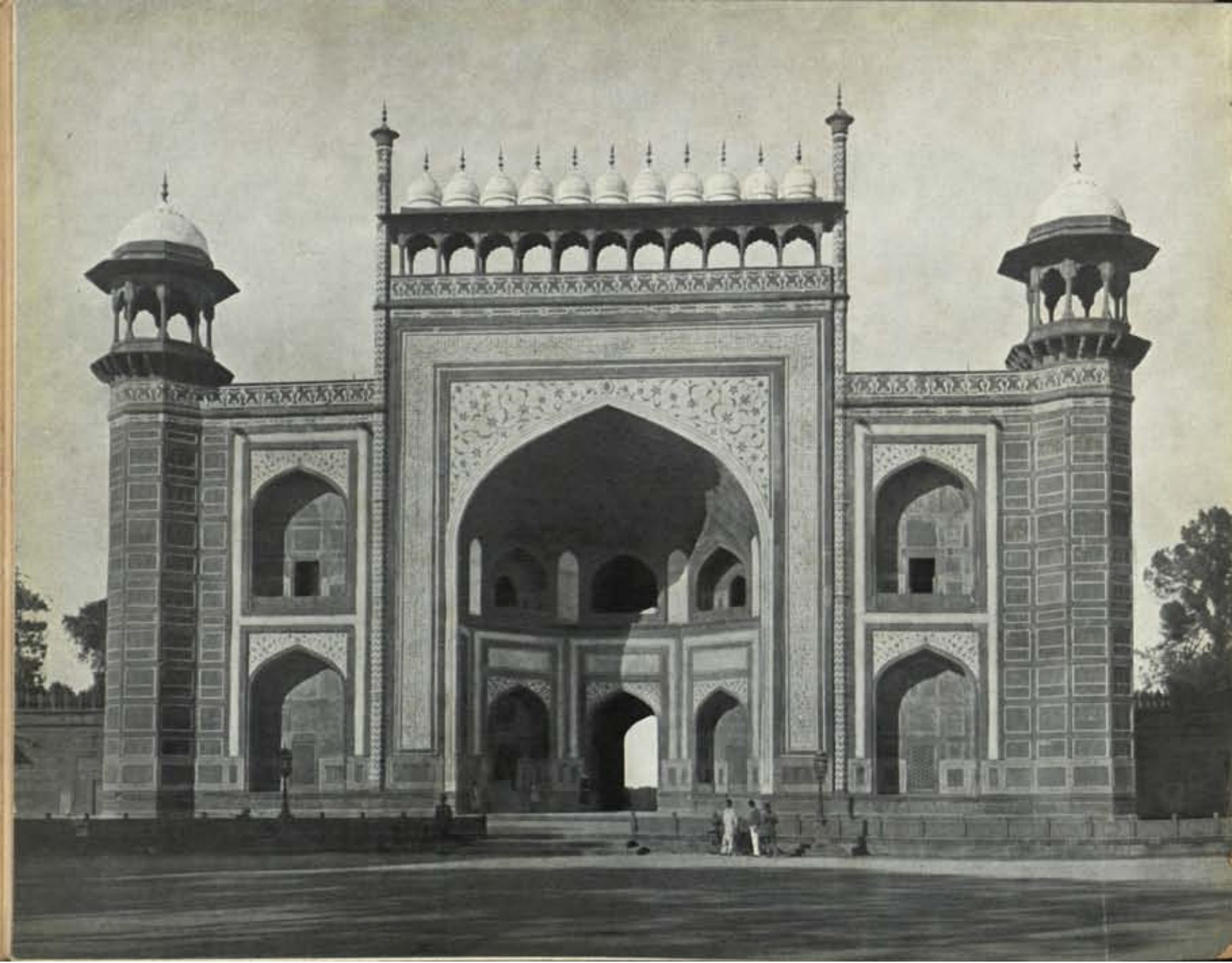


The Builder of the Taj—Shah Jahan

A view of the Taj from the  
Black Throne of Agra Fort

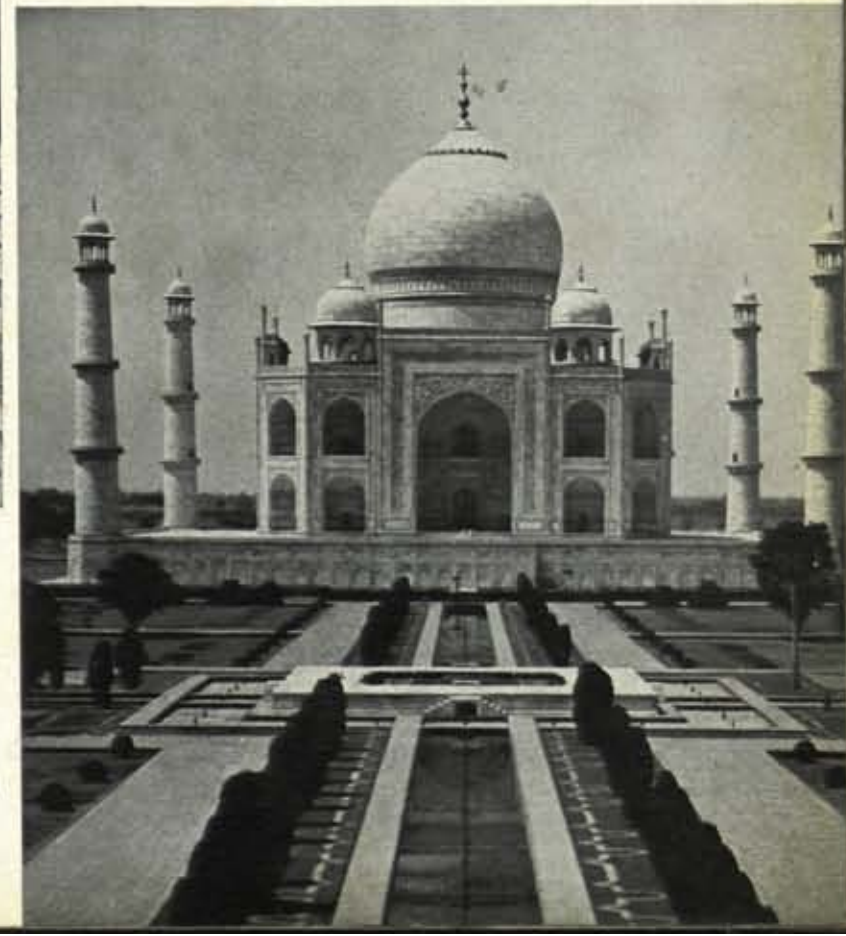






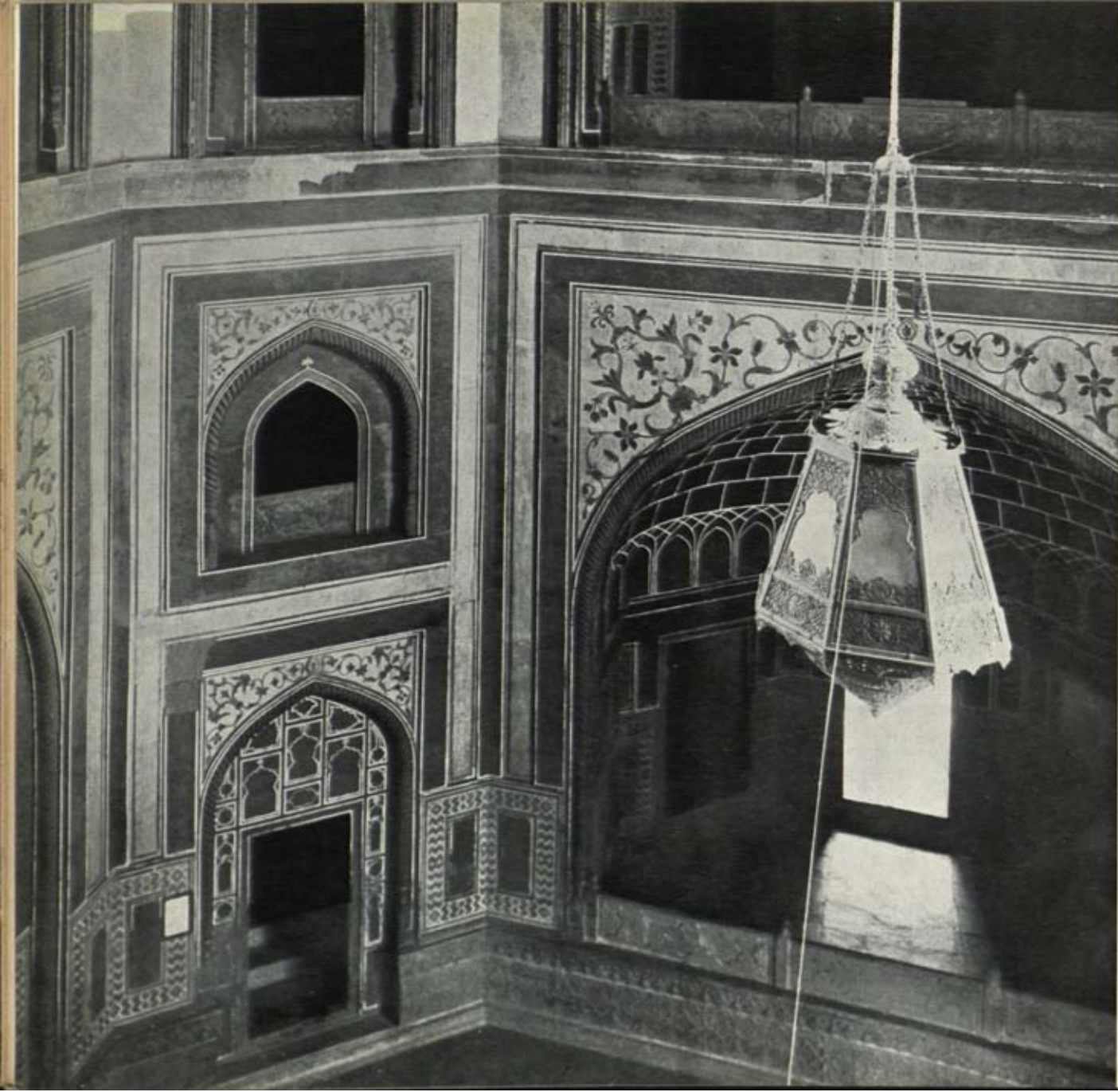
The Approach

The Entrance



The Taj



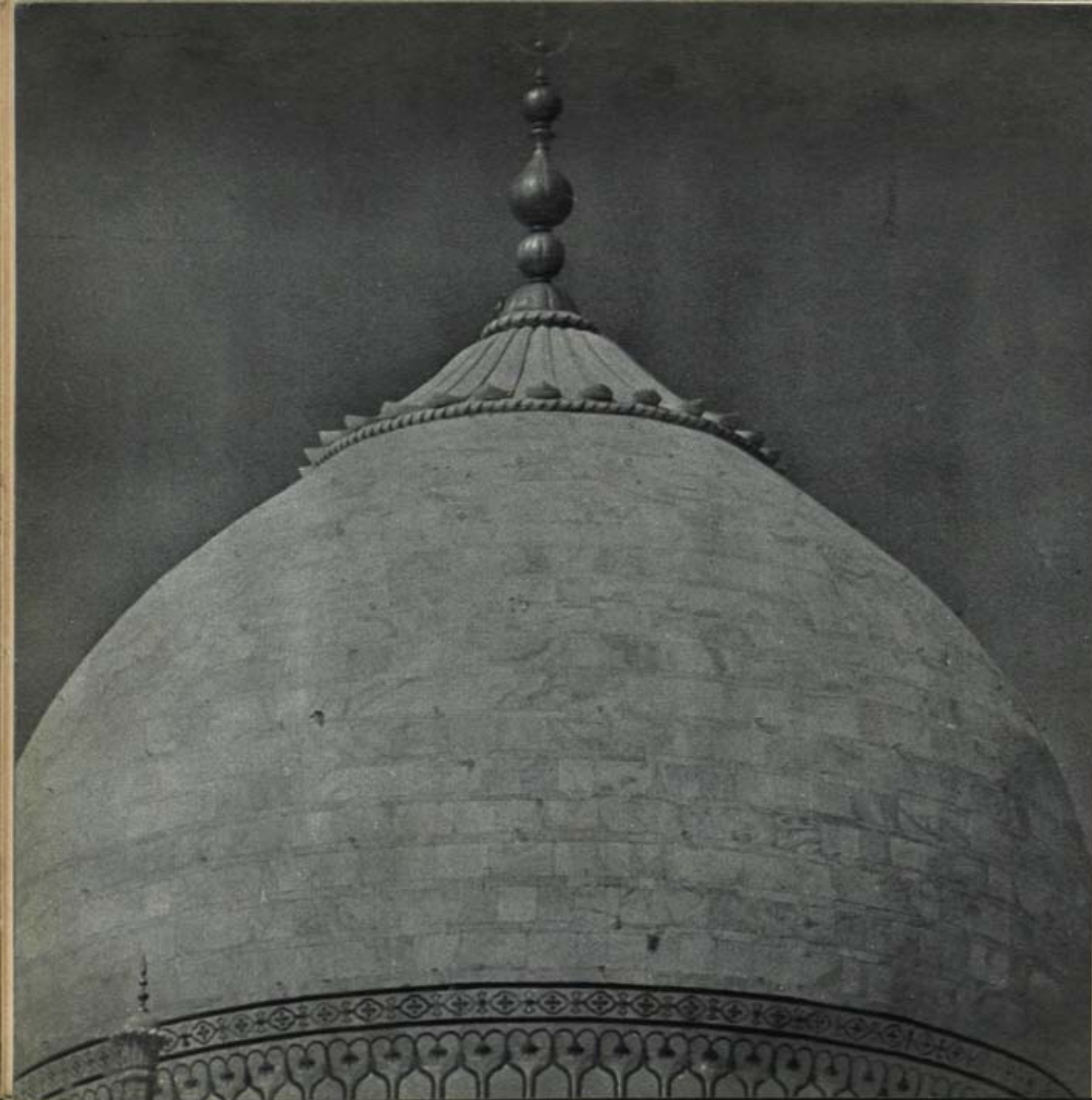


Interior of the  
Entrance

A view of the Taj from  
the river side



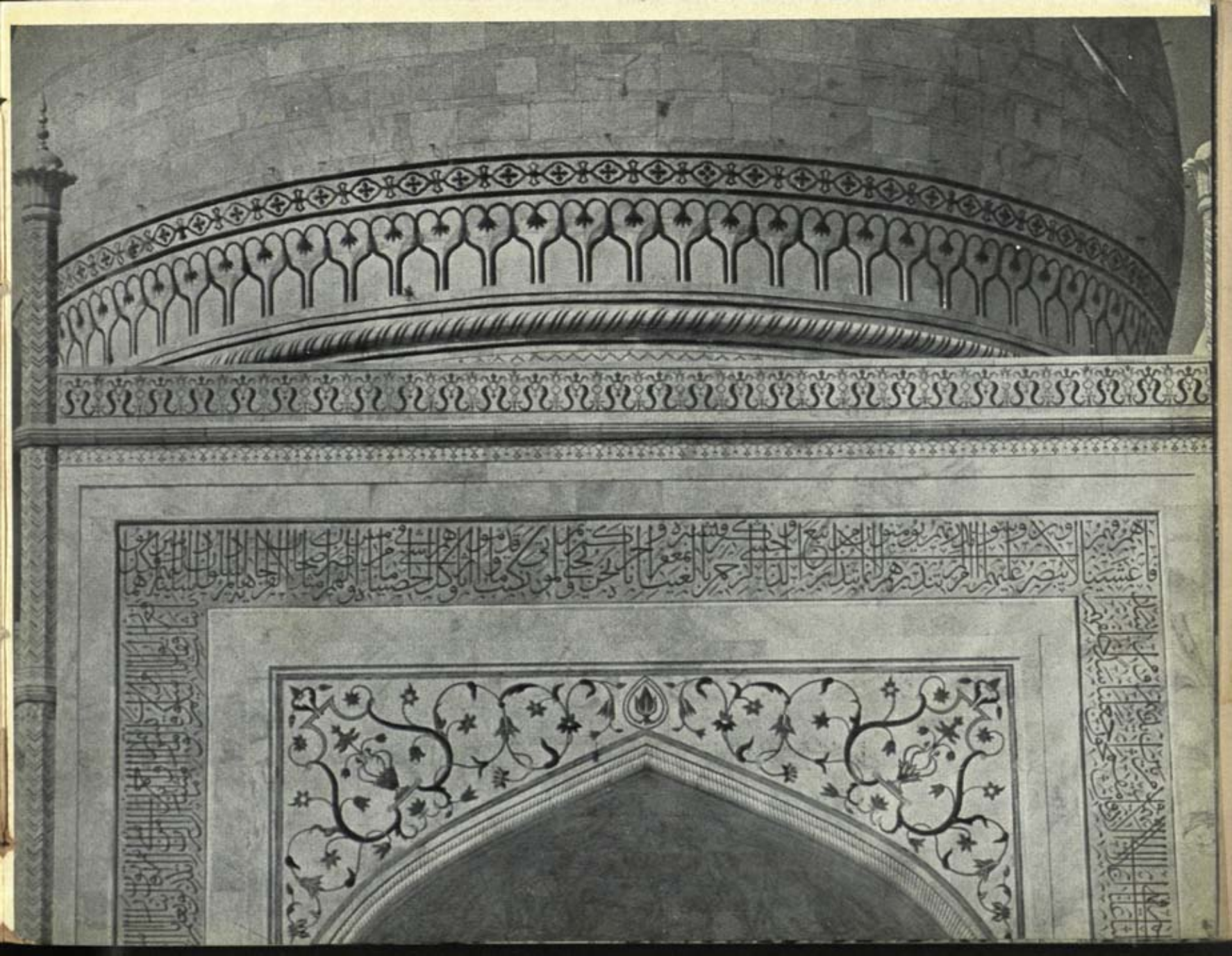




The Dome

Details of  
the Dome



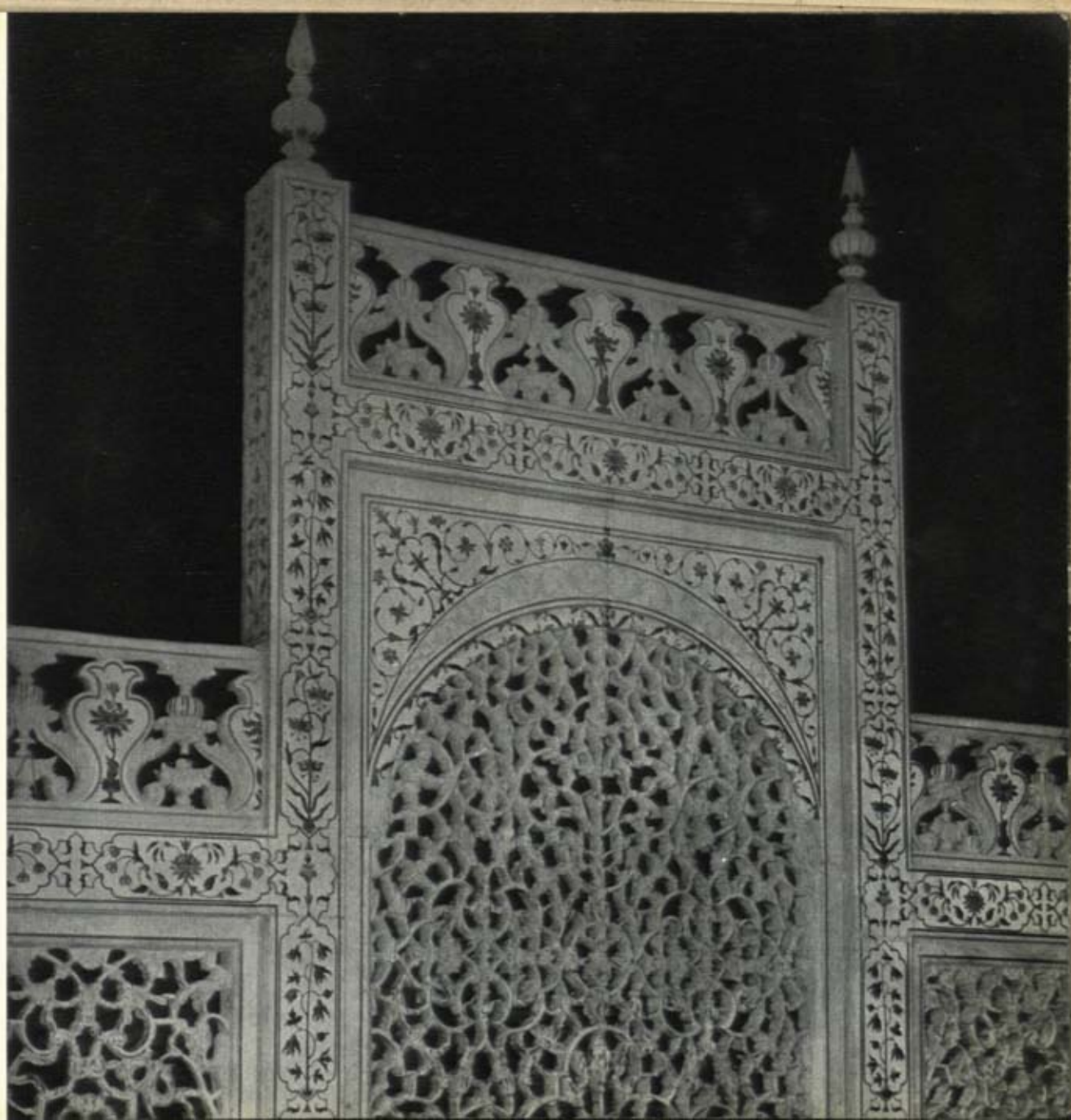




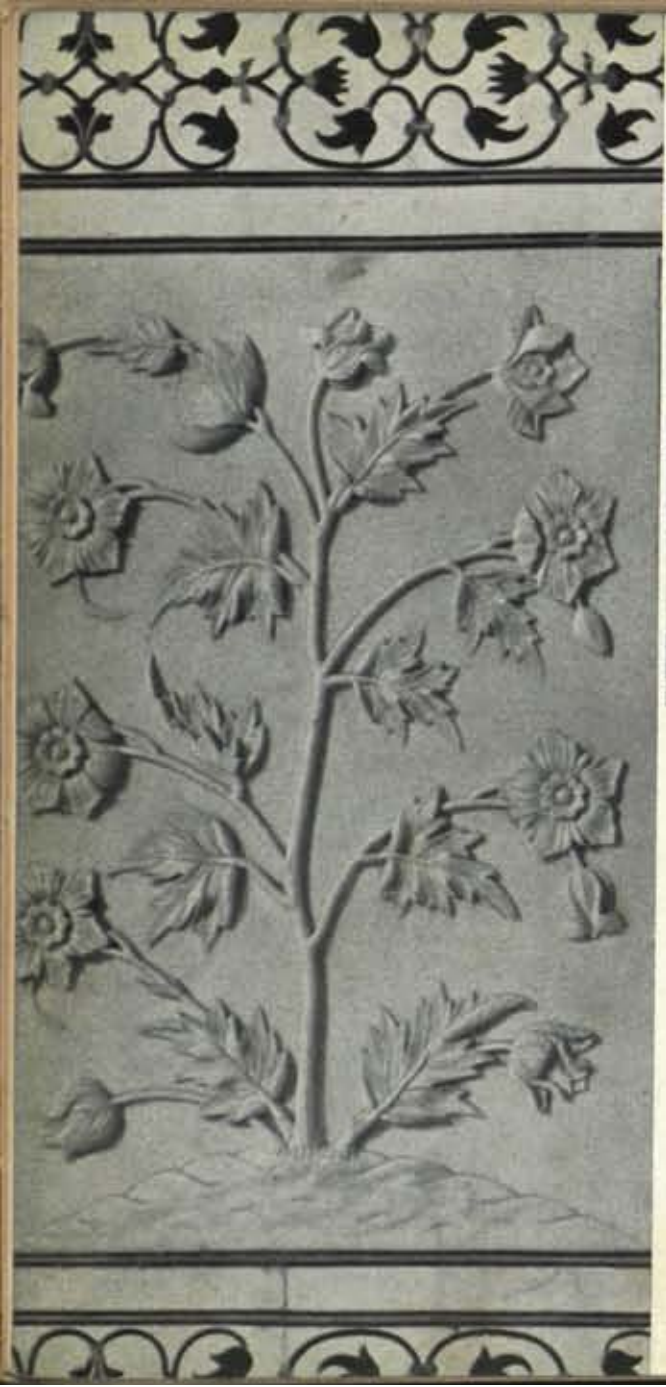
The Minaret



The Screen





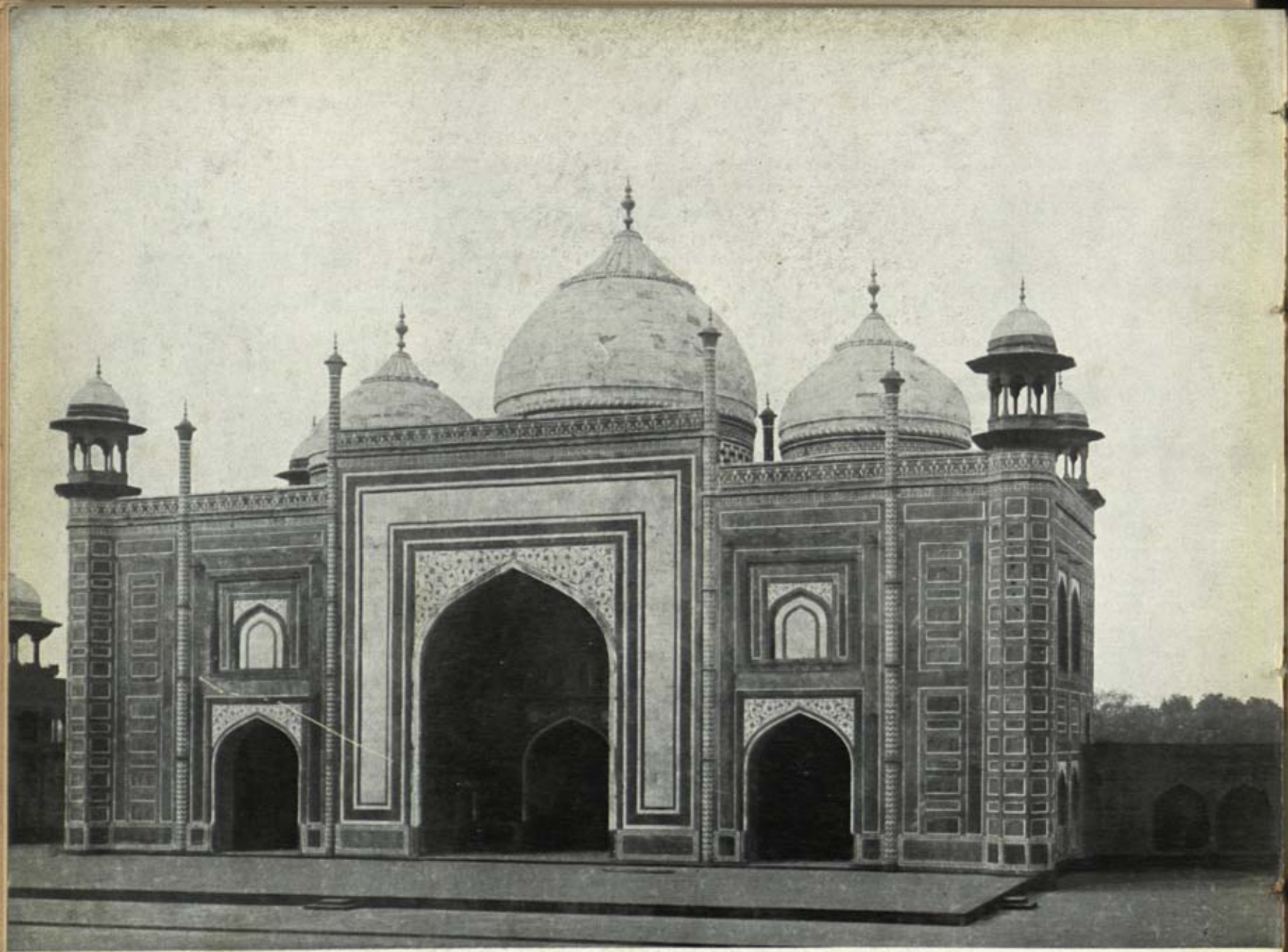


The Floral Designs

Naqqar Khana

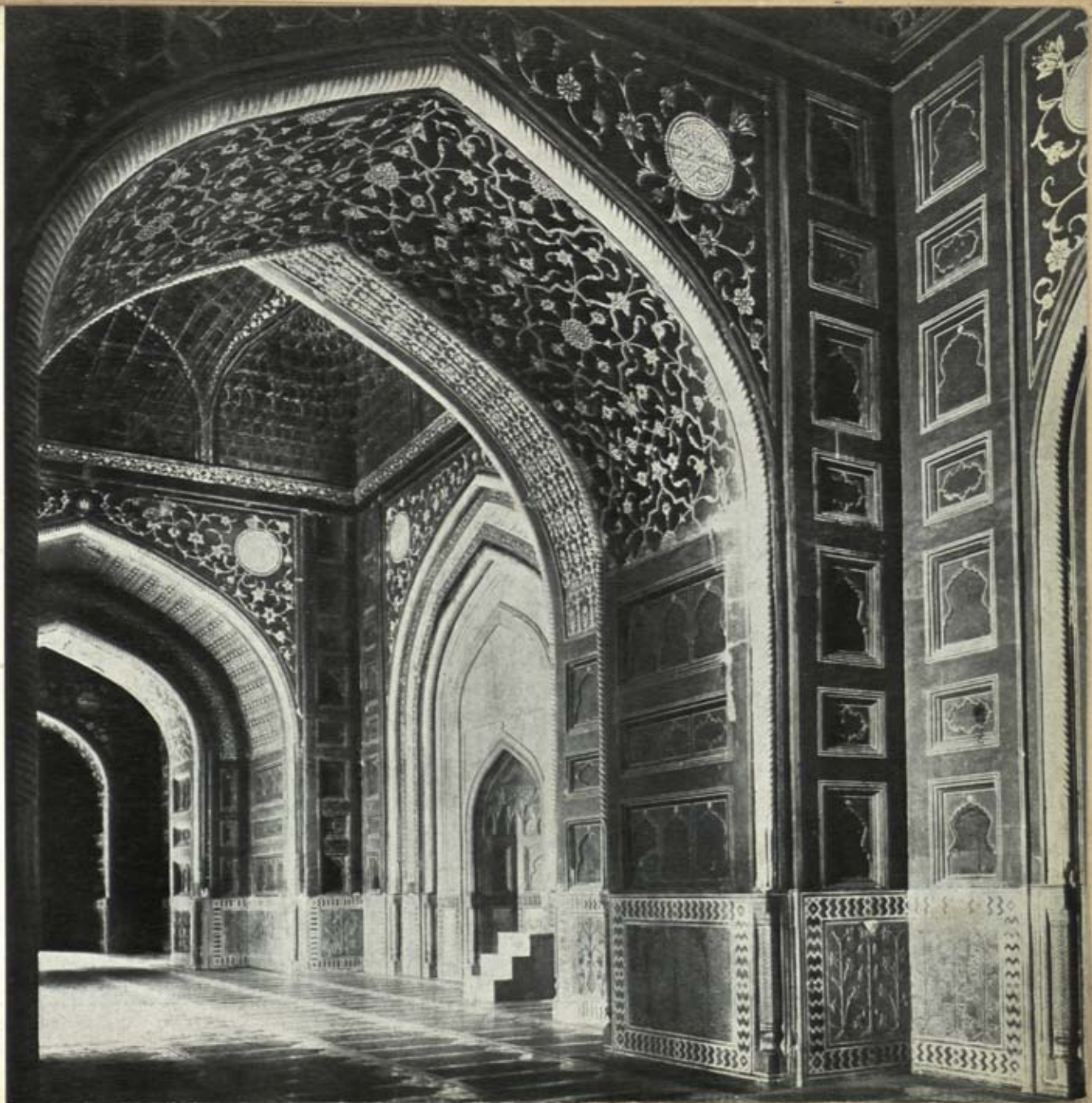






The Mosque

Interior of the Mosque







East Entrance to the forecourt of the Taj

might not paint pictures, but he could ornament enamelled tiles, decorate walls without using figures or animals, and draw designs from the mullahs when they were planning a mosque or tomb.

"Thousands of Indian craftsmen thus settled down to a new life and new work in their forced exile, took Muhammadan names, and became Persians, Arabs, Turks, Spaniards, or Egyptians. A few centuries afterwards the establishment of a Muhammadan empire in India increased the demand for Musalman craftsmen, and offered many inducements for the descendants of these Indian captives to seek employment in the opulent cities some of which their ancestors had helped to build. The new ideas brought into India by these 'foreigners' were only the old ones in a new shape, the craft ritual of India adapted to different technical conditions and to a new environment. Religious animosities by this time had softened down. The Hindu and Musalman craftsmen worked amicably together without compulsion, and used their inventive faculties to add to the splendour of Indian cities and gratify the taste of their Mogul rulers, who planned their capitals after the traditions of Indo-Aryan royalty, and were themselves generally more than half Indian by birth. The first five of the Great Moguls were, like the monarchs and noblemen who imposed their ideas upon Renaissance building in Europe,

men of wise culture keenly interested in architectural design. But while each of them gave a personal note in his palace, mosque or tomb, there was no fixed formula, no 'Mogul style'—or paper patterns to which the Indian master-builders were tied. Humayun's tastes were Persian; his builders designed him a Persianised version of the orthodox Indian Musalman's tomb. Akbar, in the beginning of his reign, ordered his imperial mosque at Fatehpur-Sikri to be built as a 'duplicate of the Holy Place' (at Mecca or Baghdad); but except in the general plan which conforms to the ritual of Islam the mosque is a perfectly original design in which the creative mind of the Indian builder is dominant. Even the orientation of the mosque is not orthodox Musalman, for it is like that of a Vishnu temple.

"Jahangir's favourite wife, Nur Mahal, who practically ruled the empire, was a Persian by birth, and she loved to imitate the painted tile decoration of her native land in a sumptuous fashion with precious marble inlay, perhaps, giving suggestions for the patterns herself. But the Itmad-ud-daulah's tomb at Agra which she built for her father is neither a Persian nor Mogul building. It is Indian, yet something new. Similarly, when the Sultan of Bijapur bade his builders make his tomb as fine as that of the Emperors of Rome, they gratified his wishes by making



an Indian dome, unique in engineering and unsurpassed in beauty, but not Roman or Turkish. The eclecticism of the Mogul period was a great opportunity for the Indian builder, and he made full use of it."

This puts us back into the bog of theories and labels and claims and contributions. In point of fact, the credit-criers and their partisan approach have confused the issue to such an extent that there is contention even as to nomenclature like "the era of Mughal architecture". Every one who attempts a clarification makes confusion worse confounded. Briggs, for instance, says : "The term 'Mogul' as applied to architecture has its drawbacks, but the fact remains that the buildings erected under the Mughal emperors were more definitely Muhammadan or 'Saracenic' in character than those which preceded them and need to be classified as a separate school." The term 'more definitely Muhammadan or Saracenic' should be noted. This is diametrically opposite to the view of Havell quoted above. Whereas, to quote Briggs, once again, it is correct to say that, "the Muslim buildings of these two centuries (the Mughal rule) form a more distinctive and homogeneous group than the architecture described hitherto (that is of the earlier Islamic rule in India)", the deep influence

of Hindu art generally, and, from the time of Akbar onwards, particularly, cannot be so easily dismissed. Concerned with proving neither the one nor the other, we are convinced that the right way to look at the development of the Mughal style and the evolution of the buildings of the Mughals is that of recognising the contribution of both the traditions and giving due credit to all the varied and various influences which, as we have taken pains to emphasise, constitute the essentials and ingredients that have gone into the making of the style and pattern called the 'Mughal' and of this thing of beauty known as the Taj Mahal.

Of the Mughal buildings which served as the main sources and inspiration for the Taj, mention must be made first of the mausoleum of Humayun at Delhi, and another lesser building nearby, though of a much later date, the tomb of Khan Khana, a Mughal noble who died in 1627. But for the four Minarets which stand on the four corners of the Taj platform, the building of the Taj and that of Humayun's mausoleum are almost identical in their form and arrangement, although the earlier building is obviously the beginning of things and the latter, equally obviously, the acme of refinement in the same line. There are differences in the shaping of the dome, that of Humayun's tomb being more bulbous, and the in-



verted lotus at the top, on which Havell has elaborated so enthusiastically and imaginatively, is of course missing. For that matter, the wall and door portion of the Taj is of a far greater elegance and formal proportion than in the earlier structure. The size and the total complex are also indicative of the difference between the affluence of the two periods. This last is, of course, clear from the fact that Taj Mahal is of marble, whereas Humayun's tomb has streaks of the more costly material. The shape of the dome of the Taj and the idea of placing the main building on a platform—these are contributions of the two buildings named above. The great and beautiful buildings of Fatehpur-Sikri, the majestic proportions of Fatehpur-Sikri's Buland-Darwaza and of Sikandra—these too are important source. Thus the sense of solidity and vastness and the look of awe and splendour are gifts of the builders of Akbar's reign. Nur Jahan's lovely structure, the tomb of her father Etmad-ud-daula, contributed the decorative style and served as the bridge of transition from stone to marble and from the strong to the delicate. Constructed, like the Taj, from flawless white marble, exuding the fragrance of exquisite finish and radiating the light of delicate refinement, this gracious structure is an important landmark on the path leading to the evolution of Shah Jahan's miracle building. The majesty and grandeur, the elegance and

formal beauty, the sense of proportion and conception of the structure '*a la grand*'—all these had been handed over by the earlier builders. They were all men. Here was a woman, and a woman like Nur Jahan at that—still considered as one of the most beautiful, cultured, elegant, gracious, gifted, taste-endowed and talent-possessing queens in world's history and one who was loved and is associated with romance as few women and few queens are. Women have their own taste, their own delicacy and refinement, their own contribution to make to this world of ours. In a sense, therefore, what was lacking hitherto, the ingredient of grace and the touch of taste in the buildings of the Mughals, is now added to the total wealth. The choice of the white and delicate-looking yet strong marble as against the hard and lusty stone is itself purely feminine in its character. As a matter of fact one of the criticisms levelled against the Taj Mahal is that it is effeminate; indeed all the buildings of Shah Jahan are regarded as that and are, therefore, usually considered as weak and decadent. Likewise the decorative element as well as the formal arrangement in respect of the sighing cypresses and a flowing river and gentle shade and a generally and softened atmosphere of peace and repose which this gem of a building breathes—all these had to be before the Taj Mahal could come into being. The place and value of this building, the tomb of Etmad-ud-daula,



as source, inspiration and precursor of the Taj is admirably summed up by Percy Brown:

"Before this earlier phase of architecture under the Mughals merged into the later, one building was constructed which may be regarded as the connecting link between the style of Akbar and that of Shah Jahan. This is a tomb at Agra of Itmad-ud-daulah, a distinguished nobleman, and the father of Jahangir's queen (Nur Mahall, by whom it was built in 1626). Apart from definitely marking the stage of transition this small but elegant structure stands in a class by itself as it illustrates a fresh interpretation of the builder's art, an expression of the style in its most delicate and refined aspect, disregarding size but aiming at exquisite finish. In the seclusion of a walled enclosure of 540 feet side this mausoleum stands in a garden recalling an abbey cloister garth, with sombre green cypress trees set sculpturesquely against gateways of red sandstone. Surrounded by a formal scheme of lawns, parterres, flagged pathways, tanks and fountains, the tomb building, in flawless white marble, reposes like a gem within its casket.... As an example of architecture in miniature this building with its accessories of garden and gateways is one of the most perfect of its kind, while its fineness is enhanced by the exquisite white marble of which the central structure is entirely composed. Then, although elaborately

ornamented, the embellishment, throughout has been carefully subordinated to the architectural effect, there is little relief work, most of the surface being delicately coloured by means of inlaid stones. The result of such treatment is that any undue brilliancy of the white marble is subdued by the subtle tints of the inlay which spins its fine filaments over every portion, often in painted patterns only excelled by those of a butterfly's wing. Much of this ornamentation of applied stones was produced by a technical process different from that which had preceded it, so that these later Jahangiri buildings not only mark a change in the architectural style but also in the method of decoration. Hitherto the inlaid work had been of the kind known as opus sectile, a marble intarsia of various colours, but from now onward the art took the form of that called *pietra dura* in which hard and rare stones such as lapis, onyx, jasper, topaz, cornelian and the like were embedded in the marble in graceful follations. The tomb of Itmad-ud-daulah prefigured that phase of white marble garnished with gold and precious stones which distinguishes the final and most sumptuous architectural creations of the Mughuls."

Gem in The Casket! the phrase so frequently lavished on the Taj is equally applicable to other mausolea. The Mughals generally set their tombs in beautiful

gardens enclosing the main structures within high walls, so that it is possible to generalise about the characteristics of Mughal building in the words of Margaret Mordecai : (In architecture) "the Indian starting point is different not only from ours, but from all others. The Greeks built their temples on the hill tops. The Romans placed theirs in the Forum or at the intersection of the two great avenues which crossed each Roman town. Narrow streets surrounded the Gothic cathedrals, but still one facade was left open on the market place. In all alike the building was designed to be seen from the outside and its principal conception was that of its exterior. In India no external effect is intended or desired. Temple, palace, mosque and tomb are reverently, lovingly guarded from the outside world. Each and every monument of Indian art was screened behind high walls like a jewel in a casket. The immeasurable truth and value of this idea, which shuts out everything discordant, vulgar or profane, and concentrates the attention of the beholder on the masterpiece alone, I was now to realize for the first time."

Nevertheless, this 'gem-and-casket' of Etmad-ud-daula or of Akbar's mausoleum at Sikandara, or of Hamayun's tomb at Delhi, is no patch on that most expensive and most elaborate and most elegant of 'gems-and-caskets'—the Taj. What is of significance

is the fact that given these three buildings, plus the Fatehpur Sikri complex, almost everything, every single component and ingredient, every variation of style or form, every experimentation in structural design or surface decoration, is already to hand. A hinter-land of development and excellences like this is not merely helpful, but is absolutely necessary for the emergence and creation of a perfected product like the one we are considering. In all ages and climes in different traditions of art in India or elsewhere centuries of growth and evolution, of trial and error of variation and experimentation must precede before the perfect moment arrives when the miracle will happen. And then when it comes about, the thing indeed appears to be like a veritable miracle. Looked at with steady eyes the marvel is but a phenomenon, and the phenomenon itself a natural and organic culmination of the process of growth. But viewed as an isolated occurrence, the thing appears to have come about so suddenly, that there is that touch of the magic wand about it, the feeling that this thing does not belong to earth but angels have fashioned it somewhere and during the night quietly placed it where we see it. This is as unjust as it is silly, because we do not give due credit to the builders and artists who created this perfection of an amalgam of various beauties and graces which their fore-runners passed on to them. The builders of the Taj did not



have to waste their energies on trials and experiments; the tradition and the result of earlier experimentation were passed on to them and they made most effective use of it. For fairy fabric as the Taj appears to be even today, after three hundred years, it is very much the work of human hands. As soon as the sorrow-steeped emperor was able to attend to things, he commanded that designs be invited for a fitting memorial to the deceased queen. Of these the one submitted by Ustad Isa Afandi was selected, and the site having been acquired from Raja Jai Singh, to whom it belonged, work on the building started. The body of Mumtaz Mahal which had been temporarily buried in Burhanpur, where she had died, was removed to Agra and her mausoleum began to take form under the supervision of Makramat Khan and Mir Abdul Karim. Ustad Isa was the chief architect; the exquisitely modelled dome was built by Ismail Khan, a Turk; and the fascinatingly accurate *tughra* inscriptions were executed by Amanat Khan of Shiraz. Other artists included Chiranji Lal of Delhi, Baldev Das of Multan and Mannoo Lal of Lahore, all of whom were associated with the mosaic and inlay work. We have seen that the records which have come down as well as the oriental, even Indian, character of the building point out the falsity of Father Manrique's contention that the Italian Geronimo Veroneo was the designer

of the Taj. The oft mentioned association of the French artist Austin-de-Bordeaux with the work of decoration also seems to be a matter of conjecture. With models like the tombs of Humayun and Etmad-ud-daulah as part of the Indian tradition of architecture, the Taj is the natural culmination of the art of building as practised under Moghul patronage. With the resources of the richest king of the world—a king whose ruling passion was architecture—and with the wealth of expert craftsmanship which the country possessed, the creation of the Taj was not impossible, even if, considering its near-perfection, not so easy. It took about seventeen years to build; nearly twenty-thousand men worked on it; material of the very best quality—marble from Makrana and Jaipur, sandstone from Fatehpur-Sikri and jewels and precious stones from all over the world—was used; and its cost variously suggested at figures ranging between fifty lakhs and six crores was, like its beauty, fabulous. No, the Taj is no work of the architect of the gods, brought to earth by the angels. It is very much of the earth, earthy, and a supreme symbol of human passion and human skill. Phrases like 'grace of form', 'harmony in proportion', 'sigh-made stone', 'poem in marble', 'essay in pure mathematics', 'a vision of paradise', 'supreme experience of India' and many others of like language which are often used are a fitting tribute to the perfection of

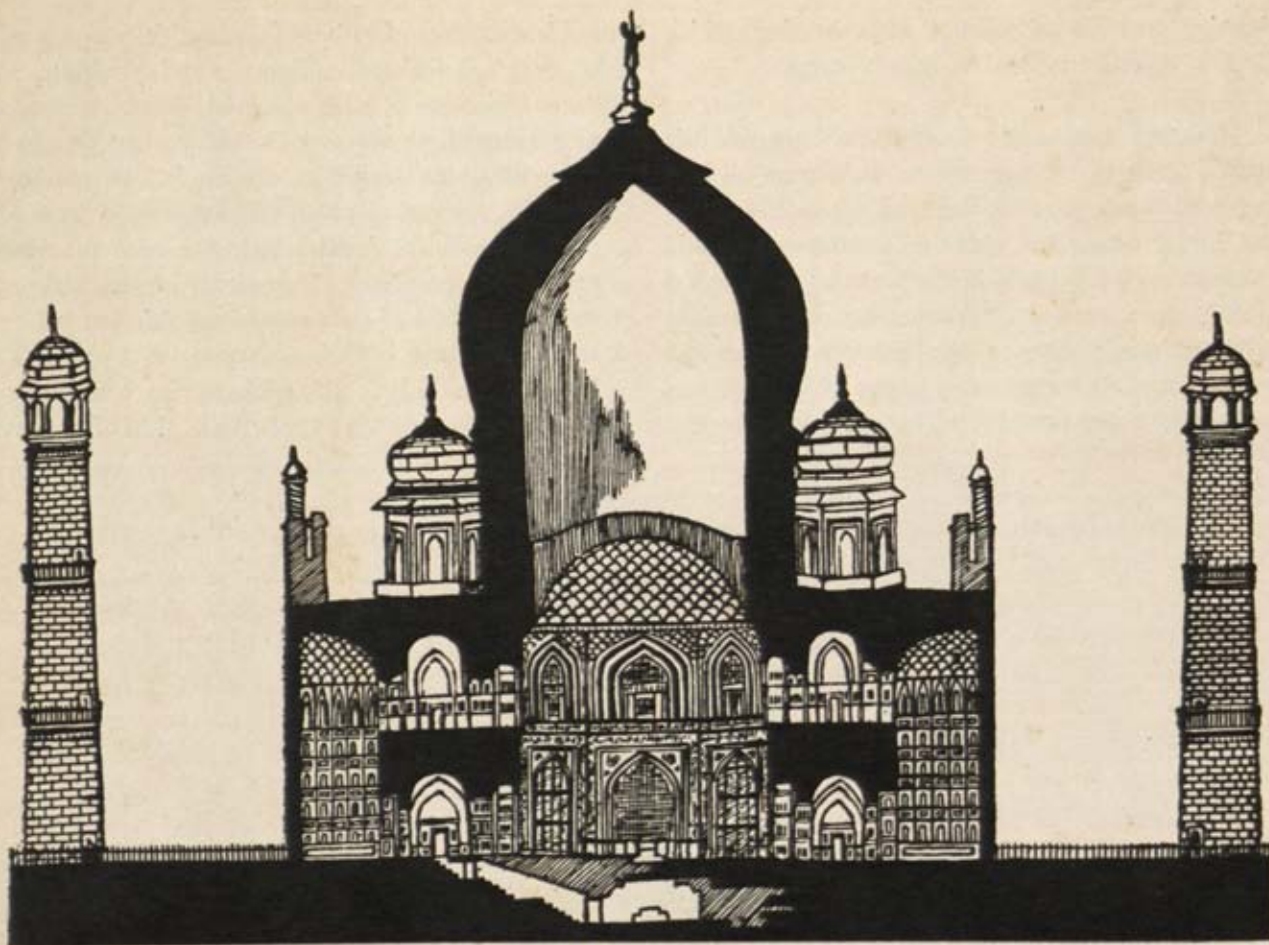
planning and the excellence of execution which Moghul architecture had as its attributes.

They say that when woman was created, the gracious part of her nature was made from all that was noble and beautiful, fine and ethereal, fragrant and lovely which the universe contained. In this incarnation of loveliness in the realm of art, the Taj Mahal, some such act of collecting, compounding and combining has been carried out to perfection and the instant of the culmination of the Mughal art was made into eternity, as it were. Consequently this

noble monument has been standing there as a model of grace and majesty, of delicacy and durability, like the combination of lotus and gold — has been standing as a splendid 'Jewel and Casket' for the delight of those who have seen it or will see it. Of course, in this case, the casket which encloses—gates, walls and gardens—and the jewel which has been set within are of such grandiose proportions, of such elaborate conception, and of such exquisite finish that volumes might be written in their description and praise. The least we can do is to give a chapter each to the two. These follow, first 'The Casket' and then 'The Jewel.'







ELEVATION OF TAJ MAHAL

**CHAPTER**

**4**






## The Casket

*O how shall summer's honey breath hold out  
Against the wreckful siege of battering days,  
When rocks impregnable are not so stout  
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays ?*

*O fearful meditation ! where, alack !  
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid ?*

SHAKESPEARE



THE TAJ IS ONE OF THE MOST WIDELY known and familiar buildings of the world. But it is the monument proper, the mausoleum, which the world is usually acquainted with. In respect of that also, those, who have not seen this great miracle of architecture, have, as their idea of the edifice, an

image of a fragile, toy-like, confectionary cake. This notion is further strengthened by the countless replicas in ivory or marble and by innumerable dainty-looking pictures of the great monument which adorn the walls of drawing rooms all over the world. Yet, the mausoleum is a very big structure. What is



more, it is generally overlooked that the mausoleum, huge itself, is not an isolated building but is a part of a vast complex, which is, itself, as tradition would have it, only the executed half of a far more elaborate and ambitious plan. They say that there was to be on the other side of the Yamuna another Taj in black marble, an exact copy of the mausoleum and set in a similar group of structures as the existing monument is; that would have completed the total scheme and fulfilled the entire intention of Shah Jahan. This idea seems to have some support and justification because generally the Mughal tombs occupy the centre of the entire enclosure and are not placed at one end as the Taj Mahal is. Looked at in that way, the other half of the scheme does seem to be missing. Joined with each other through a bridge of black and white marble stretching across the river, the two mausolea would then have got rightly placed, and formed the central shrine around which the rest of the buildings, the mosques and their *Jawabs*, gardens and gates, outer enclosures and the enclosing walls—all these would have stood like a casket encasing a jewel. As it is, the jewel is placed at the far end on the bank of the Yamuna where the complex of structures is, in a way, completed, so that the journey, which the visitor begins at the outer gate along the road, ends there; and the feeling one has is that of entering into a temple standing by the holy river.

Critics like Havell have made much out of this peculiar un-Mughal placing of the tomb. However, to the tomb proper we shall come later. For the time being, let us have a survey of the various additional buildings, structures and other things like the gardens which are part of the total design. Some of these are themselves real gems of art and architecture and do not receive due recognition and fair appreciation because, compared to the splendid Taj, everything else pales into insignificance.

In myth and legend, one often comes across accounts of how, at times, the gods themselves take a direct interest in the work and lives of certain human beings. Could one believe such things, the Taj might well be regarded as the handiwork of fairies and angels. Here, truly, everything is so perfect that the architect of the heavens might not be ashamed of owning this as his work. At any rate, some kind of uncanny inspiration, an unerring instinct, seems to have been at work right from the start. The very selection of the site was a master-stroke for this placed the tomb "directly on the bluff overhanging the river with no wall behind it. This intensifies the impression that it is an illusion—a mirage which has risen from, and might sink back into the Jamuna." The placing of the Taj on the river would not only enable Shah Jahan to "watch from his balconies



in the palace fort, the sunrise and the sunset flush its marble into rosy life", but is perhaps "proof of the story which maintains that the Taj as we know it is but half of the plan, and that the great Emperor meant to complete his master-piece with another tomb for himself across the river, joining Taj to Taj by a bridge of black-marble, Holy Yamuna itself the centre of the scheme." Whatever the reason, certain it is that the selection of the site has contributed greatly to the general beauty of the design. And what is true of this item is true of all the rest. For, whether in the overall plan of the vast complex of buildings or in the minutest of details, from the graceful fashioning of the great dome to the smallest flower in the scheme of ornamentation, the entire work is superb. Where a critic or two have been critical in their comment, they have been stoutly contradicted by authority as well as majority. Thus, for instance, Huxley condemns the minarets as the worst feature of the Taj and counts them among the ugliest structures ever erected by human hands. These very minarets are, on the other hand, extolled by Fergusson as "of the most exquisite proportions, more beautiful, perhaps, than any other in India". Similarly, Bishop Heber thought that the central dome was the least pleasing part of the Taj, whereas the consensus of opinion about this component of the Taj has been that "shining like an enchanted

castle of burnished silver", it constitutes the "crowning glory" of the building. In fact, whenever a fault is found or a flaw detected, one can safely assume that the fitness of a certain part in the total scheme has not been fully appreciated. For example, it is only when viewed from the riverside that the minarets linking the Taj with the two flanking red buildings fall into the right proportion, whereas a partial view, as is obtained from the gateway side, may, possibly, make them appear as standing pointlessly apart. Or else, the criticism is based on judging the building in the light (or the darkness) of the so-called canons of Western architecture. Those do not apply generally to the Indian architecture. In the case of the Taj, no canons of architecture apply. Edwin Arnold already quoted, said:

*No architecture as all others are,  
But the proud passion of an Emperor's Love  
Wrought into living stone...*

And Edwin Lutyens' comment deserves repetition: "It is wonderful but not architecture...and its beauty begins where architecture ceases to be." The more elaborate and prosaic statement of the French traveller, Bernier, is, on this point, still more explicit: "The columns, the architraves and the cornices are indeed not formed according to the pro-



portion of the five orders of architecture so strictly observed in French edifices...nevertheless, the edifice has a magnificent appearance and is conceived and executed effectively. Nothing offends the eye; on the contrary, it is delighted with every part and never tired with looking." That is it—"delighted with every part and never tired with looking". Visitor after visitor and critic after critic has underscored this. Here is Fergusson: "It is the combination of so many beauties and the perfect manner in which each is subordinated to the other that make up a whole which the world cannot match and which never fails to impress even those who are most indifferent to the effects produced by architectural objects in general." Or Sleeman: "After my quarter of a century of anticipated pleasure, I went on from part to part in the expectation that I must by-and-by come to something that would disappoint me, but no, the emotion which one feels at first is never impaired. On the contrary, it goes on improving from the first *coup d'oeil* of the dome in the distance, to the minute inspection of the last flower upon the screen around the tomb..." One could go on but it is better first to have a general idea and then to delight our eyes and souls with an inspection of this vision of ideal beauty "on which the mind could dwell for ever without fatigue", part by part.

Of the over-all design of the Taj, Fergusson makes the following remarks: "If the Taj were only the tomb itself, it might be described, but the platform on which it stands with its tall minarets, is a work of art in itself. Beyond this are the two wings, one of which is a mosque which anywhere else would be considered an important building. This group of buildings forms one side of a garden court; and beyond this again an outer court. This is entered by three gateways of its own and contains in the centre of its inner wall the great gateway of the garden court, a worthy pendant to the Taj itself. Beautiful as it is in itself the Taj would lose half its charm if it stood alone..."

And since at the time of its construction the Taj was reached from the riverside, Villier's great description of the entire scene as viewed from that end is also worth quoting: "Looking back, the sight of the great pile of buildings on the far side of the river was worth all the trouble of crossing it. For the first time, I had a full view of the whole group, and realised the great scale on which it had been conceived; the vast walls and platforms rising sheer above the water, the two great rose red mosques, the corner towers, with their elaborate arcades, and raised on the central platform high above all, the pale lilac minarets, walls, and the dome of the Taj worked in shadow, and

outlined with the gold thread of the western sun, while below, reflected in the slow-flowing tranquil Jumna shone another Taj—the second Taj of Shah Jahan's unrealised ideal.

“Coming in under the deep shadow of the high river walls, their bold panels filled with vases of flowers cut in the hard red sandstone, surprise one with ever fresh delight, so striking is the wonderful finish yet perfect subordination of all parts to the whole design,—even each battlement of the garden wall has its star of white marble inlay,—and walking back up the broad landing-ghat paved with brick-work in various patterns, one sees the Taj as no doubt Bernier and Tavernier first saw it when they sailed down stream, leaving the Court of Aurangzeb in the fort to visit this famous tomb.”

This is to say that the Taj is a vast complex of buildings and not merely the marble mausoleum where the bodies of Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan lie entombed. Discarding the Fergussonian method of moving outwards from within, we may follow the plan in the more logical manner of reaching the mausoleum last.

It has been observed earlier that Mumtaz Mahal died in Burhanpur in the Deccan in 1631. Her

mortal remains were interred into a temporary grave in a garden nearby. A search was then made for a suitable site in the capital for the grandiose mausoleum for his beloved wife which the emperor contemplated. If a wonder of the world had to be created, the right location was very important. The site decided upon was originally the property of Raja Man Singh and was at that time in the possession of his great grandson Raja Jai Singh. The estate was purchased—according to custom it could not have been accepted as a gift—and a much bigger portion from the imperial holdings was given to the owner in exchange. It was to this place, known as the garden of Raja Man Singh, that the contents of the temporary tomb at Burhanpur were removed. A temporary dome was erected over them, for the final structure was to take nearly a score of years to build. This temporary dome stood at some distance from, and to the south of, the mosque on the west of the Taj. In the heyday of its glory, in those days when the Taj was built, Agra boasted of many a magnificent mansion of one nobleman or another which stood along the road that wends from the fort to the mausoleum. Great and high sounding names like those of Todar Mal and Raja Man Singh, Asaf Khan, Rumi Khan, Mahabat Khan and Raja Jai Singh and others like them, which sprawl across the pages of the history of those times,



were all associated with palace-like buildings belonging to these noble men. These adorned the left side, along the bank of the Jamuna of what is now known as the Strand Road. All these gracious and glorious structures are gone. Not a trace remains of anything except the holy shrine of Saeed Jalal-ud-din Bukhari which also dates from those days. The vast enclosure of the Taj buildings lies beyond the huge MacDonnel Park belonging originally to Khan Alam, a goodly building associated with whom still stands inside the garden. The area which houses the Taj and subsidiary structures is known as the Taj Ganj. The Taj complex is entered through a fine sandstone entrance known as the Taj Ganj Gate which leads into an oblong courtyard surrounded by arcaded rooms of solid masonry. This enclosure has a gateway on each side; one of these is the grand structure which forms the entrance to the Taj. The gateway standing right opposite is known as Mumtazabad Gate. The enclosure is large enough for such material as had to be dumped as it came from all corners of the country, if not of the world.

The area between the main entrance to the Taj and the impressive gateway of Mumtazabad is known as *Jilokhana*. This quadrangle as well as the several bazars and *serais* which existed hereabouts

are no longer what they used to be. The account given by Abdul Hamid Lahori in his history of Shah Jahan's time known as *Badshah Nama* indicates that at the time of the construction of the Taj, this whole area was studded with fine buildings and busy bazars. Abdul Hamid writes: "The *Jilokhana* is two hundred and four yards in length and one hundred and fifty yards in breadth. There are 128 cells on all the four sides. Along the garden wall there are two *khwaspuras* (quarters for domestics) one to the east of the *Jilokhana* and the other to the west. Each of these is 76 yards long and 64 yards wide and there are 320 cells for the servants. To the east and west of the *Jilokhana*, there are two bazars, each 20 yards wide, in which there are red-sandstone shops and houses and cells of brick and lime. On the south, there was a Chaupar Bazar measuring 90 yards each on the eastern and western side and 30 yards each on the northern and southern. On each side of this four-fold bazar there were state-built *caravan-serais* two of which were really well appointed...The Chaupar Bazar had a *chauk* in the centre which was 150 yards long and 100 yards wide. In the *serais* and bazars produce and merchandise coming from all over the world and of all kinds were to be found. Behind the imperial *serais* the merchants had put up many mansions and *serais* and all these had grown into a big township which was known as Mumtaza-



bad." In fact, this name was given to this locality by Shah Jahan who had built many houses here for the workers and attendants. A mosque and other requisite public buildings were also put up. The old Mumtazabad is now known as Taj Ganj and here there still live descendants of the people who took up their residence at the time of Shah Jahan. From the quadrangle of the *Jilokhana*, there is an impressive entrance to this whole area. This gateway, standing opposite to the main entrance to the Taj Mahal, is 65 ft. by 37 ft. Today, we see neither the magnificent Chaupar Bazar nor the Chauk near the imperial *serais*. Shabby and broken structures, most of which have been incorporated in the present-day houses, is all that reminds us of the once glorious and populous Mumtazabad.

As we enter the *Jilokhana* from the Taj Ganj, there is the Fatehpuri Mosque to the right and on the opposite side, a tomb known as the *Sahelion-ka-Gumbad*. The mosque is a finely built structure and is associated with Fatehpuri Begum, another wife of Shah Jahan, the same lady after whom the Fatehpuri Mosque at Delhi is named. The mosque measures about 104 ft. by 38 ft. and on the main prayer floor 1,760 "prayer-carpet" are marked out. At one time, this mosque was very beautifully decorated and there is still a great deal of fine stone-cutting

work for the visitors to admire. On the opposite side, there is the *Sahelion-ka-Gumbad* which contains the graves of two of the attendants of Mumtaz Mahal. The structure stands in the middle of a square platform measuring 156 ft. each way. The simple marble tombs carry no inscription nor dates of death.

At the other end of the *Jilokhana*, towards the east, there are again two buildings. These are the tombs of Sati-u-Nisa who was a favourite attendant of Mumtaz Mahal and who was entrusted with the task of looking after the temporary tomb of Mumtaz Mahal at Burhanpur and with the removal of the remains of the Empress from there to Agra. Similar to this tomb is the tomb of Sirhindi Begum, another of Shah Jahan's queens. The two structures are built exactly alike except that the grave of the queen was once very elegantly decorated with *pietradura* work. In workmanship and delicacy, the marble as well as the ornamentation here corresponded to Mumtaz Mahal's tomb but all the precious stones have been removed.

The outer courtyard mentioned above is a spacious enclosure measuring 880 ft. by 440 ft. By now one's eye has already turned to the gateway in the northern wall which forms the entrance to yet another quadrangle, the Garden Court, at the far-



end whereof stands the mausoleum. Coming as it does as an architectural achievement after the Buland Darwaza and the Shahi Darwaza at Fatehpur Sikri, the gateway at Sikandara, and the riverside entrance of Itmad-ud-daulah's tomb, this magnificent gateway is one of the most beautiful in India; and, as Havell rightly advises, "It is well to pause before entering and admire the proportions and perfect taste of the decoration of this gateway; for afterwards one has no eye for anything but the Taj itself." This imposing portal of red sandstone is not only "a worthy pendant to the Taj itself", as Fergusson remarks, but is itself "a palace both as regards its magnitude and decoration." 150 ft. wide and nearly 100 ft. high, this gateway, "adorning a side of a spacious, square pavilion," consist of a lofty central arch with double-storeyed wings on either side. On top there is a row of white marble cupolas and the corners are crowned by open domed kiosks. Texts from the *Quran*, exquisitely inlaid in black marble and in *tughra* characters which appear to be of equal size everywhere, invite the 'holy of heart' to enter the 'Gardens of Paradise'. The arches are ornamented with mosaic inlay, and the doors were once of pure silver and studded each with 1100 rupee-headed nails. These original doors were carried away, as much else was, by the Jats and replaced by the present set made from an alloy of several metals.

Within the archway of this majestic entrance, there is a large chamber with a vaulted roof. Entering this one moves on to the steps leading to the garden, and lo! the last veil of the bride is off. Until now, not a glimpse of the Taj was possible, but reaching beneath the arch of the entrance, on a sudden one comes upon that vision of paradise which was promised on the outside. For a while one is stunned, overwhelmed, taken aback and overawed with the enchanting loveliness of the Taj—afloat and reflected in the still waters—standing at the end of an avenue of stately cypresses. For many the impact of this first sight has lasted ever after in their lives and they have cherished the precious memory as a veritable treasure, as a standard of aesthetic value to judge other buildings by. To quote one admirer, "Between the dark reflections in the still water of the deep green guardian cypress trees, shone the Taj, a miracle revealed." Or, as another lover of the Taj puts it, "We pass under the arch, and the Taj appears in sight, some 75 rods away. Probably no masterpiece of architecture produces an equal effect.

"At the farther extremity of a marvellous garden, reflected in all its whiteness in a canal of dark water which lies motionless with clumps of black cypresses and great mounds of crimson flowers on its banks, the perfect structure rises like a vision. It is a float-

ing dream, an aerial being without weight, so accurate is the balance of the lines and so faint the shadows on the virginal, translucent stone. These black cypresses framing it; these masses of verdure, through which here and there the blue sky is seen; this turf in the strong sunlight, with the sharp, black shadows of the trees falling across it—all these solid things render more unreal the white vision which seems ready to vanish into the light of the sky. I walked towards it along the marble bank of the dark canal, and the mausoleum assumes relief. Approaching nearer, the eye takes more and more delight in the surfaces of the octagonal monument. These are rectangular expanses of polished marble, on which the light rests with a soft, milky lustre. One had no idea that a thing so simple as mere surface could be so beautiful, when it is broad and pure. Then the eye follows the graceful and well-ordered interwinning of great flowers, flowers of onyx and turquoise, incrusting along a projecting part of the building, and the harmony of the delicate chasing, the marble lacework, the springing arches, the notched balustrade, the infinite play of the simple and the decorated. Of course, a vast garden still intervenes between the shrine of beauty and the visitor who has yet to traverse nearly half a mile ere the holy of holies will be reached; but the eyes may feast on the glory revealed, and the soul of the spectator is thrilled

at the first sight of this graceful building, so simple and yet somehow, so enchanting."

As with all Moghul tombs of any repute, the Taj Garden forms an integral part of the entire design. The usual plan of the four fold plot—the Muslim idea of paradise, of restfulness—heightens the effect of grace and simplicity which obtains everywhere. The garden enclosure is surrounded by a high wall of red sandstone with a gateway on either side. On each side of a long and shallow reservoir placed in the centre and interspersed with fountains runs a marble pathway which terminates in a double flight of steps leading to a broad marble platform four feet high. From this rises a second platform  $22\frac{1}{2}$  ft. above the garden level and on this stands the Taj. The fact that the mausoleum stands at one end, and not, as is commonly the case, in the centre, has been noted earlier. Instead of the usual tomb, "a beautiful raised fountain tank of white marble occupies the centre of the four-fold plot, and the actual tomb of Lady Arjumand Bano stands on the great platform at the end of the gardens overlooking the shining reaches of the river Jamuna."

The change of design, or rather, the selection of the site for the actual tomb, has helped to emphasise the airy and magical quality of the building. One



wonders why Shah Jahan changed the traditional design. The answer is summed up by Villiers thus: "Was it the natural beauty of the site on the river cliff? Did he build this tribute to his adored wife there, because from his balconies in the palace fort he could watch the sunrise and the sunset flush its marble into rosy life? May be some Hindu influence, inherited from his Rajput mother unconsciously, led him to raise the tomb on the banks of the Jamuna placing the tank for the lotus lilies of the Lord Vishnu in the centre of the garden; or perhaps it is a proof of the story which maintains that the Taj as we know it is but half of the plan, and that the great Emperor meant to complete his master-piece with another tomb for himself across the river, joining Taj to Taj by a bridge of black marble—Holy Jamuna itself the centre of the scheme." Whatever the reason, "one of the many master-strokes which called it into being was thus placing it directly on the bluff overhanging the river with no wall behind it. This intensifies the impression that it is an illusion—a mirage which has risen from, and might sink back into the Jamuna."

And so there it stands, beyond the jets of fountains and the rows of dark green cypresses, raised on its marble pedestal by the bank of the river with only the blue sky behind, the Taj Mahal, "soft as ivory and shining like crystal, floating in unearthly

beauty like a vision of enchantment! So light, so airy, so much more beautiful than the most beautiful. One longs to grasp it lest it fade away and dissolve in mist. Truly it is like nothing else in the world". This sense of enchantment is echoed by many: "Other buildings may be majestic but this is enchantment itself. So perfect is the form that all other structures seem clumsy. The first impression is that of a temple of white ivory draped in white Brussels lace." Or, "the walls are like muslin dresses, radiant with flowers and jewels. The perforated marble gates are like lace veils." And if it is not ivory, lace and muslin, it is heavenly beauty and feminine grace. "It is lovely beyond description but the loveliness is feminine. It awakens ideas of fair-complexioned beauty." Havell goes a step further: "The Taj was meant to be feminine. The whole conception and every line and detail of it expresses the intention of the designers. It is Mumtaz Mahal herself, radiant in her youthful beauty who still lingers on the banks of the shining Jamuna... or, rather, we should say, it conveys a more abstract thought it is India's noble tribute to the grace of Indian womanhood—the Venus de Milo of the East."

But the Taj Gardens, pretty and picturesque, are no mean objects of art and soon one likes to postpone the inspection of the pearl for the setting. Sur-

rounded by high walls of red sandstone on three sides—excepting, that is, the direction of the River Jamuna on whose bank the Taj stands—the quadrangle on which one now looks measures 1860 ft. by 1000 ft. Along the entire length from the entrance to the platform on which the mausoleum rises runs a shallow reservoir strewn with 84 fountains. On either side of this canal there is a marble pathway paved with slabs of fine stone arranged in fanciful geometric devices. Dark cypresses, symbols of gentle sorrow, line the avenues and add a grave dignity to the scene. As in the case of all tombs of the Tartars, these gardens are an integral part of the total plan and in spite of Havell's opinion that "the present garden is a jungle...so that one can hardly realize how glorious it must have been when the whole intention of the design was fulfilled", there is no doubt that if "the mausoleum itself were nothing but ruin—which it is not—the garden would still be worth it." Another writer, Ethel Kelly, entered a more emphatic note of protest than Havell: "The garden restored, or rather demolished to English uniformity, no longer has any Oriental character." Nevertheless, with its paradisaical beauty, it is the sort of garden which makes one think of Omar Khayyam's quatrain :

*I sometimes think that never blows so red*

*The Rose as where some buried Cæsar bled;  
That every Hyacinth the Garden wears  
Dropt in its Lap from some once lovely head.*

Who knows ? May be, the fair beauty of Mumtaz and the fragrant splendour of Shah Jahan have not wholly perished but have found their way into the charm and loveliness of this picturesque garden. One admirer, André Chevrillon, writes lyrically of his impressions: "This garden is the work of a worshipper, who desired to glorify Allah. It is a place for religious joy: 'Let no man who is not pure in heart enter the garden of God,' says the Arab text graven above the gate. There are parterres which are heaps of velvet, some of the strange flowers are like bunches of crimson moss. Trunks of trees rise all blue with convolvulus; elsewhere great red starts gleam amid the dark foliage. Among the flowers countless butterflies make a perpetual cloud. Many beautiful little living things, tiny striped squirrels, and birds in abundance, green parrots, brilliant parquets, a whole little world, splendid, happy, and secure; protected against vultures and hawks by white-clad guards, who with their long pea-shooters keep away all mischief and cruelty from this place of peace.

"Upon the surface of the motionless water, water lilies and the lotus outline their stiff petals, seeming



to rest solidly upon the dark mirror. Between the dense masses of foliage there are glimpses of English lawns all flooded with sunlight, and of spaces of blue sky sometimes traversed by a triangle of white stocks, and now and then the far-off vision of the phantom tomb, a sad, virginal ghost. How calm and splendid is this solitude, full of a pleasure at once intoxicating and serious: It is the beauty, the love, the sunlight of Asia, of which Shelley dreamed!"

The earliest description of the Taj Gardens comes from the pen of Bernier. He has left an account of the gardens as he saw them, in about 1660, from the high platform of the Mausoleum. "To the left and right of that dome on the lower surface you observe several garden walks covered with trees and many parterres of flowers...Between the end of the principal walk and this dome is an open and pretty large space, which I call a water parterre, because the stones on which you walk, cut and figured in various forms, represent the borders of box in our parterres."

"The various gay parterres", says Villiers, that authority on the Gardens of the Mughals, "mentioned by Bernier have all been swept away, excepting only the stone-bordered, star-shaped beds along

the canals, which are now laid out in grass. The cypress avenues have been replanted, but one looks round the garden in vain for that favourite motive which so many forms of Moslem art borrowed from garden-craft, the symbolic mixed avenues of cypress and flowering tree. Palms have recently been planted round the central raised tank and its fountain parterre. At present they look heavy and stumpy, but in the future, when they tower with their graceful heads above the cypress trees, they will mark the centre of the gardens, without obstructing the view of the monument; their slender stems repeating the idea of the graceful detached minarets at the four corners of the Taj platform. And in this famous Indian garden these four areca-nut palms opposite the four corners of the tank would combine this artistic purpose with the old Hindu symbolism of the marriage of the fruit trees—one of which was usually a palm—by the well."

But whether the gardens are or are not what they were when planted, and whether this person or that likes or does not like their present look, the fact remains that this setting for the tomb creates a most picturesque effect and adds greatly to the beauty of the perspective. Fergusson has very ably put these two aspects together as follows: "The long rows of cypresses, which line the marble paths

that intersect the garden at right angles, are now of venerable age; and, backed up by masses of evergreen foliage, lend a charm to the whole which the founder and his children could hardly have realised. Each of the main avenues among these trees has a canal along its centre studded with marble fountains, and each vista leads to some beautiful architectural object. With the Jamuna in front, and this garden with its fountains and gateways behind; with its own purity of material and grace of form, the Taj may challenge comparison with any creation of the same sort in the whole world."

Such then is the garden of the Taj. Havell who called it a jungle and all that, admitted, nevertheless, that "the mausoleum is set in a garden of exquisite design. The watercourses are laid out with the geometrical precision of a fine diamond and if the mausoleum itself were nothing but ruin—which it is not—the garden would still be worth it." Those who are fond of statistics may want to know that the distance between the Taj entrance and the central marble tank is 412 ft. 6 inches that the width of each of the two canals is  $16\frac{1}{4}$  feet and that each side of the tank is  $43\frac{1}{4}$  ft. and of the platform around the tank  $74\frac{1}{2}$  ft. In the middle of the tank there is a large fountain and at all corners there are four small fountains. The portion of the canal between the entrance

and the tank contains one large fountain at the beginning, and 24 small fountains up to the tank. On the other side of the canal, between the tank and the lower red-sandstone platform on which the Taj stands, there are 25 small fountains and one large fountain at the end. Thus the total distance between the platform of the main entrance and the lower platform of the mausoleum proper is 925 ft. Yet all this is of little interest to the eye when actually seeing the Gardens which are an attempt to recreate upon earth the garden of paradise. The two canals stand for the legendary *Tasnim* and *Salsabil* and the marble tank set on the marble platform with marble seats is a replica of the *Kausar*. The drops of water upon the lotus-leaf look like living pearls during the day, and, by night, "like stars fallen from the high sky". Once this garden contained numerous kinds of flowers and fruit trees and it was regarded as one of the most distinguished of oriental gardens. Of the old trees which were cut down to provide a better view of the mausoleum, the oldest is a *sumbal* tree on the side of the eastern wall, which is said to have been standing for 450 years. Along the walls of the garden, there are several buildings. On either side of the central tank, there is a beautiful three storeyed structure. Standing on a platform measuring nearly 125 ft. by 48 ft. each building—one of these is the *Naqqar khana*—is 74 feet by 37 feet.



Each storey carries an elegant marble-capped sandstone cupola. Close to the building on the west there is a tomb of some worthy ancient.

This kind of symmetrical construction is evident again in the case of the two really fine sandstone structures flanking the Taj. As is well known, the building on the western side is a mosque, and the identical structure to the east is its *Jawab*—a parallel, an 'anewring' construction—known as the *Ibadat Khana* or *Jamait Khana*. Before we have a look at the mosque let us take note of an important item. Adjoining the western boundary wall, where the well of the Mosques is located, there is a small stone-enclosure having its entrance to the south, and open unto the skies. Measuring 19 feet by 6½ feet, this greenery-shaded enclosure marks the site where the remains of Mumtaz Mahal were deposited when first brought to Agra. From this temporary grave they were removed to their present place of internment in the Mausoleum.

The platform in front of the Mosque is of red sandstone and measures 186 feet by about 52 feet. The Mosque measures 180 feet by 79 feet. A highly polished small marble-piece is so fitted that it serves as a mirror and one can see the mausoleum reflected in it. The floor is of material which is exceedingly

fine and sparkling and appears velvet-red in shade. On that 539 prayer-carpet have been neatly marked out with black marble. All over there is exquisite calligraphy and the name '*Allah*' and the phrase '*Yakafi*' and quotations from the scriptures are inscribed. The roof is reached by a staircase situate on the south and supports four octagonal towers and three elegant domes. On either side of the mosque, to the north and the south, and set along and upon the enclosure-wall, there are two towers. The one to the north, and nearest the river, is known as the '*Basai Burj*'. It is said that at the time of planning the Mausoleum, a small settlement of the same name existed hereabouts. It was necessary that the inhabitants should surrender this piece of land. When the emperor expressed his desire to take it over and offered handsome compensation for their loss, the good people of the place said that they would give their land and houses without taking anything in return provided that some part of the complex of buildings were named after the Basti. The emperor, courteous and gracious as few others in history, accepted the suggestion and this tower, associated with that settlement, was almost the first structure put up. A similar tower was put up, for the sake of balance, on the other side of the mosque. This sense of symmetry is an essential feature of the design of the huge complex. We have al-

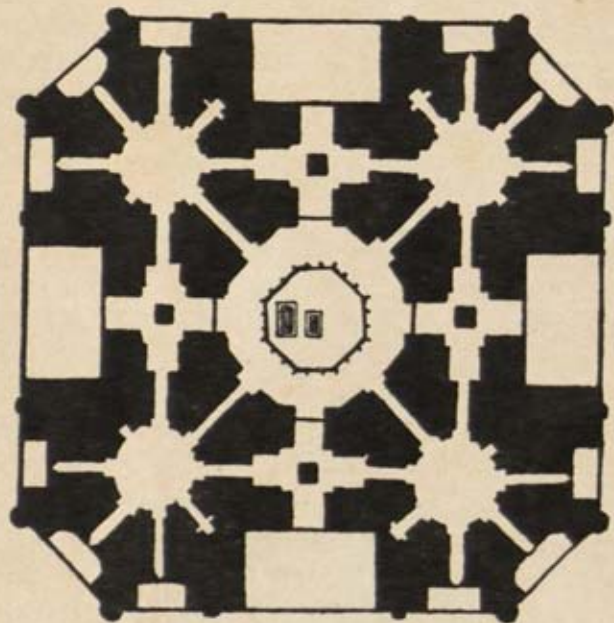
ready observed how the mosque has its *Jawab*, a parallel structure on the eastern side of the *Rouza*. The two buildings are exactly alike except that, within, the *Jamait Khana* does not contain the accessories which go with a mosque, and, instead of Quranic inscriptions, there are beautiful flower-designs and other decoration effectively done in white on a red ground. On the floor between the building and the Taj mausoleum there is a full-size reproduction of the pinnacle adorning the Taj. This gives some idea of the true proportions of what from below appears to be a tiny thing. The over-all height of this top-most portion of the main pavilion is nearly 31 feet

and the various components are giant-sized. They say that this pinnacle is so composed, and fashioned from such metals, that the amalgam helps to keep the structure safe from damage through lightning.

But the pinnacle, itself a thing of grace and beauty, is no part of the 'Casket'. It belongs to the 'Jewel'; it is the last, lustrous component of the dazzlingly white marble mausoleum of Mumtaz Mahal. Let us, therefore, now turn to the appraisal of the Jewel, *The Taj*, that wonder of the world which, in the opinion of many, is worth coming all the way to India.







PLAN OF TAJ MAHAL

**CHAPTER** 5





## And The Jewel

*As when some face  
Divinely fair unveils before our eyes—  
Some woman beautiful unspeakably—  
And the blood quickens, and the spirit leaps,  
And will to worship bends the half-yielded knees,  
While breath forgets to breathe. So is the Taj !*

EDWIN ARNOLD

AS WE HAVE SEEN, THE VISITOR TO THE Taj, the pilgrim to the unearthly pavilion which seemed to Kipling to be "the embodiment of all things pure and all things holy and all things unhappy", needs must linger long before he reaches the "Ivory Gate through which all good dreams come". One traverses

nearly one-third of a mile before the marble terrace is gained through a double flight of concealed stairs. This gives some idea of the size and scope of the complex of buildings which form a part of the total plan. But the tomb proper is itself no trinket. In the words of Rodrick Cameron: "Yes, it was very



beautiful but more than anything else it was its size that I had to get used to. It was so much larger than I had expected. A square with its corners cut off, it sits upon a great marble platform, measuring, to be exact, three hundred and thirteen feet square . . . The span of the great alcoves or arches cut into the wall are staggering once one is close to them."

The total design of this pearl among tombs is finely described by Miss Cummings: "Of all the lovely things in creation," she writes, "whether of nature or art, none has ever conveyed to my mind the exquisite delight of that fairy-like, snowy palace among tombs—the Taj Mahal. In olden days the eastern poet, Sadi complained that his friends could not sympathise with his wearisome praises of his love; he said that, could they but once behold her beauty, they might understand his song, which must seem but as an idle tale to those whose minds had not been steeped in the same sweet influences. So it is with the loveliness of this fairy architecture. A cluster of pearly, snow-white domes, nestling round one grand central dome, like a gigantic pearl. These crowning a building, all of purest, highly-polished marble, so perfect in its proportion, so lovely in its design, so simply restful to the eye, and withal so amazingly intricate in its simplicity, that it is, in truth more like some strange dream in marble than like a work of human

hands. Its four sides being precisely similar, it follows that, from whatever side you behold it, its perfect form never varies. Far from the city or from any other building, it stands alone in its transcendent loveliness, having its own rich Eastern garden on one side, while the warm red sandstone wall, above which it is raised, is washed by the blue waters of the sacred Jumna."

The central marble platform on which the tomb stands rises above another sandstone platform connected with the garden court by means of a set of two flights of stairs. On two sides of the lower platform there are the two buildings of stone, facing inward and identical with each other in size, design and execution, which were the last structures we described in the last chapter. The one on the west is used as a mosque, and the other, its *jawab* or counterpart, on the east, is a rest-house where travellers were allowed to stay, when they came to attend the Queen's death anniversary. These buildings "noble in their own right" are "an essential part of the whole composition, serving as supporters to the slender, detached minarets". As we noted, on the floor near the eastern structure, there is a full-size drawing of the pinnacle that crowns the dome. This indicates the proportions of the great tomb which is both beautiful and large. In fact, one of the glories of this marvel

of architecture is that a majestic size has been so effectively co-ordinated with an almost unearthly grace.

The main pavilion, which forms the tomb proper, stands in the middle of the huge, black-and-white marble terrace which is 313 ft. square and measures 186 ft. each way with the corners cut off by about 34 ft. This gives to the mausoleum an octagonal shape. From the centre of the edifice rises the principal dome which is nearly 80 ft. in height and has a diameter of 58 ft. The walls are almost a 100 ft. high so that the total elevation of the building equals its width. The sides of the rectangular base storey are recessed into bays and archways, and at each corner there is a smaller dome, about 27 ft. in diameter. The small, two storeyed apartments over which these diminutive cupolas are raised are sets of three rooms each on the eastern, northern and western side. They measure 69 ft.  $\times$  19½ ft. each, and are inter-linked by halls and passages which go round the central chamber under the principal dome. On the riverside, there are two staircases which take one down to the underground rooms and to what was once the end or the beginning of a subterranean passage to the Fort. Perhaps, here at one time stood some structures and a *ghat* belonging to Jai Singh.

The lofty dome of the pavilion, arousing associa-

tions with the 'white radiance of eternity', soars to a height of 243 ft. which is five feet higher than the Qutb Minar in Delhi. The spherical body rests on a tall shapely drum at the base and the foliated crest has the shape of an inverted lotus. No other component of the Taj gives more to the building an air of a fairy fabric floating in the clouds. True, Bishop Heber thought that it was the least pleasing part of the Taj. But, by and large, the dome has been greatly admired. To quote Percy Brown: "Its (Taj Mahal's) crowning glory is the great dome which hangs in the sky like a shapely white cloud its soaring height being mainly due to the tall drum at its base. The body of the dome is spherical so that it rests on this drum like a ball on a cup, but its upper curve by means of a carefully calculated tangent gracefully tapers off into a foliated crest." Being hollow within, the dome, in every respect a masterpiece of Indian art, has a special acoustic quality. A note sung softly or a flute played gently in the vaulted chamber below, where the tombs are, will fetch five-fold reverberations of a sweetness which made one admirer gush forth: "Was ever melody like this? It haunts the air above and around. It distils its showers upon the polished marble. It condenses into the mild shadows and sublimates into the softened hallowed light of the dome. It rises, it falls, it swims mockingly, meltingly around. It is the



very element with which sweet dreams are builded. It is the melancholy echo of the past—it is the bright, delicate harping of the future. It is the spirit of the Taj, the voice of inspired love which called into being this peerless wonder of the world, and elaborated its symmetry and composed its harmony and, eddying around its young minarets and domes, blended them without a line into the azure of immensity." Another visitor expressed himself thus: "High above, as if through dense smoke, one sees the dome rise in the darkness, rise and never end, and its walls seem vaporous, the marble blocks unsubstantial. All is aerial here, nothing is real and solid; this is a world of visions. Sounds even are no longer of the earth. A musical note uttered here is repeated, above one's head, in regions which we cannot see. Pure as the voices of an Aerial, it grows fainter, then dies; and suddenly is heard again, far off, glorified, spiritualised, multipulated indefinitely, repeated by countless, remote voices, by an unseen choir of angels who carry it up, ascending higher and higher, until it loses itself in the faint sound which remains continuous, hovering on like the music of a soul over the tomb of the beloved". In short, one may hear the nearest approximation, upon earth, to the music of the spheres.

Before we enter the wonderful shrine itself, let

us take note of the four slender minarets that stand like sentinels, at each corner. Each minaret is 137 ft high, and though of plain design, is delicately picked out by black lines. Containing two circular balconies and surmounted by a cupola each, the minarets are so planned that should they, by some accident, happen to crash, they will not damage the main pavilion, but will fall away from the tomb. It is these minarets which Huxley so categorically condemns as "the worst feature of the Taj", and which he places among "the ugliest structures ever erected by human hands." Others have likened them to four maids of honour attending on their queen, and Fergusson regards these as "of the most exquisite proportions, more beautiful, perhaps, than any other in India".

Though Huxley criticises its comparative poverty in that respect, the Taj displays a deal of interior and exterior decoration. The archways of the facades are inscribed, as is the monumental entrance to the gardens, with finely wrought passages from the Holy Quran. The master calligraphists, Amanat Khan and Qadar Zaman, must have been expert artists, indeed, for the black *Tughra* characters are precisely graduated to appear everywhere as of uniform size.

We have already observed in an earlier chapter

the marvelous elegance and excellence of the same kind of calligraphic ornamentation of the main entrance to the Taj. Such beautiful decoration is in evidence all over the 'complex'—for example, we see it in the mosque—and in its beauty and effectiveness is unparelled except, perhaps, for what we find on the Buland-Darwaza at Fatehpur Sikri. The name of Amanat Khan Shirazi deserves particular mention in connection with this work. The stamp of his exceptional gift in this respect is evident not only in the lettering but also in the selection of what is inscribed and where. Those who understand the language, and the meaning and implications of each Quranic quotation have showered high praise, and deservedly, on the artist. Speaking of this, one narrator, of the story of the 'Imperial Agra of the Mughuls', Mazumdar waxes poetic. He is describing the entrance to the garden and says: "One thing to be particularly noticed here is the marvellous skill with which the letters in black have been inscribed on the gate. They seem to be of the same length and thickness, both above and below, although there is a distance of 80 ft. intervening. The same skill has been exhibited on the other gates of the Taj buildings for which credit should be given to Amanat Khan of Shiraz, who used to draw a salary of rupees one thousand per month. The passages inscribed are taken from the Quran and the aim of both the

architects and artists was to give the whole place a look, and the whole atmosphere the joy and sublimity of Paradise, according to Islamic conception, as here the remains of Mumtaz were to be laid. This was the feeling—a deeply religious and sacred feeling—which found its outlet and apt expression in the silent, yet speaking language of the edifice of the Taj. The fervent love of the subjects for the queen who had died a premature death at the age of thirty-eight, only two years after Shah Jahan's accession to the throne, was awaiting an expression, the result of which was the splendid mausoleum of the Taj. Mumtaz had conquered the hearts of her people... Her religious fervour, her charity and benevolence, her clemency and motherly affection for subjects were widely known and admired, which produced their genial effect on the minds of those architects, sculptors and masons who planned the building, held the chisel or constructed the grand edifice by laying one piece of marble upon another. The sorrow for the sudden and untimely death of their beloved queen sat deep in their hearts; and they longed, in harmony with the feelings of the emperor, to build her a memorial which could be linkened unto Paradise—a fit abode for the remains of the departed soul. To them Mumtaz was still a living force, an inspiration, a nymph of the air they breathed, a goddess of the art by which they yearned to perpetuate



her memory. They laid on her a garb of white marble and adorned it with jewels to make it resemble the white muslin shroud, interwoven with gold and silver embroidery which covered her body at the time of her burial."

This last relates to the other type of ornamentation consisting of inlay work which is all so neat that the surface feels as smooth as silk. Lists of all the precious gems and stones, obtained and used, run into several pages. Their variety is incredible and their cost must have been fabulous. All that wealth could procure has been lavishly expended on the decoration of the mausoleum: "This pure amalgam of marble and precious stone marries the art of the jeweller with that of the architect." Fergusson himself waxes eloquent: The Taj "is an exquisite example of the system of inlaying with precious stone which became the great characteristic of the style of the Moghuls after the death of Akbar. All the spandrels of the Taj, all the angles and more important architectural details are heightened by being inlaid with precious stones, such as agates, blood-stones, jaspers and the like. These are combined in wreaths, scrolls and frets, as exquisite in design as beautiful in colour, and relieved by the pure white marble in which they are inlaid, they form the most beautiful and precious style of ornament ever adopted in

architecture; though, of course, not to be compared with the intellectual beauty of Greek ornament, it certainly stands first among the purely decorative forms of architectural design. This mode of ornamentation is lavishly bestowed on the tombs themselves and the screen that surrounds them, though sparingly introduced on the mosque that forms one wing of the Taj, or on the fountains and surrounding buildings. The judgement, indeed, with which this style of ornament is apportioned to the various parts is almost as remarkable as the ornament itself, and conveys a high idea of the taste and skill of the Indian architects of that age."

It is a pity that Huxley should have cried down the "expensiveness and picturesqueness" of the Taj. Its marbles are carved and filigreed, are patterned with an inlay of precious stones. The smallest rose or poppy on the royal tombs is an affair of 20 or 30 cornelians, onyxes, agates, chrysolites..... "His imagination staggers at the variety of precious pebbles that contribute to the inordinate, fabulous costliness of the Taj. He allows that 'the pietra dura' work at the Taj.....is marvellously neat and of extravagant costliness" but as work of art, he does not rate it very high. For another writer, the feeling is straight and simple: "The whole building is of the purest, softest, most radiant white marble, all the decoration

of both exterior and interior being a persian flower mosaic executed in precious and semi-precious stones." She sums up the scheme of the interior decoration of the Taj as follows: "Below are panels carved with Indian lilies in high relief and framed in bands of persian mosaic. Then arches inlaid with texts from the Quran in black marble, the angles, between being filled with flower mosaics in semiprecious stones. Then other arches merely outlined in black which meet the dome. This plan of lightening the decoration as it rises gives an effect of etherealism nowhere equalled in the world. The dome itself is carved throughout with honeycomb work, and is pure ivory-white but for an ornament at its apex, a red flower surrounded by waving black petals like the tassels of a cardinal's hat. As one looks up at it, the tassels seem to wave and then revolve faster and faster and the effect is truly wonderful."

But a true lover of flowers and gardens like Villiers will not leave the matter at that: "It had been raining up on the high platform of the mausoleum, the moisture glistened on the waving black and white lines of the inlaid pavement, whose symbolic ripples carry out an old Indian tradition, so that the Taj, like many an ancient Hindu shrine, stands in the centre of a tank. Here, on most days, the glare of sunshine radiating up from this dazzling pavement is quite

blinding, and all but obscures the lovely details of the dado round the building; but in the more subdued light the inlaid borders and delicate carving of the floral panels showed clearly. This dado is one of the most charming examples of Muhgal decorative work, and like the parterres which it naively represents—for the design is taken directly from the oblong flower-beds, such as were seen beside the canals of every palace garden—it only reveals its full delicacy of form and colour on a dull day. How delicious they are, those formal flower-beds, with their blue-bells, daffodils, tulips, crown imperials, lilies, and irises, which stand up swaying on their slender step by the black and white marble ripples, forming a fairy circle round the tomb. Spring flowers all of them, for the Rose of Persia and the Lotus of the Good Law hold a truce, and are missing from this gathering of the flowers. May be the famous Kashmir gardens of the Empress Nur Jahan were the artist's inspiration here. In the record which is still preserved, of the craftsmen employed on the Taj, the name appears of one Ram Lal Kashmiri proving that at least one Kashmir artist was employed by Shah Jahan.

"Great was my delight, some months after this rainy day at Agra, to forget the fatigue of the long three days' drive up the Jhelum ravine, as I found



one by one spring flowers of the Taj. First came the tulips, high up on the slopes of the Murree Hills, growing in little patches where the sun could reach them through the fir trees dainty little cream-coloured flowers, with pointed petals streaked on the outer sides with carmine. Lower the hillsides were bare as yet, but down in the ravine by the river lilies were coming out, in form like our Madonna lilies, but smaller, pink in colour, with long reed-like leaves, glowing in tufts in crevices of the limestone cliffs, tantalisingly out of reach. Then as the rocks receded and the valley grew more wooded, splendid crown-imperials shot up through the mossy carpet strewn with the brown of last year's leaves, magnificent great red bells, which glowed between the bare mauve twigs and russet buds of the undergrowth. Each flower as we passed it I thought the loveliest of all, but the craftsman who crowned the crescent of the Taj with an iris knew best, for the memory of the other lilies fades before the blue Kashmir iris.... Most of these blossoms reappear inlaid on the actual tombs of Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan, and they decorate the famous screen which surrounds the graves. This screen, the flower dado, and the Sultana's bath in the Jasmine Tower of the fort, exhibit to perfection that marvellous decorative feeling which seems inborn in Oriental craftsmen. Each is a masterpiece in its combination of inlaid jewelled colour and

delicate marble carving. It is impossible to decide which is the most faultless: the screen; seen in the dim light under the dome, with its lattice-work of lilies and its upper rail, whereon a row of marble vases blooming with neverfading flowers stand round the shrine; the marble flower-beds without; or the fountain-bath of the Jasmine Tower."

Anyway, the variety of the stones used is great and the entire decoration is so lavish yet so chaste and restrained that it helps create the "pure amalgam of marble and precious stone which marries the art of the jeweller with that of the architect", and which, to requote Fergusson, makes the Taj "an exquisite example of the system of inlaying with precious stone which became the great characteristic of the style of the Mughals, after the death of Akbar." But to this aspect of the matter we shall return when we get on to the domes on which this "mode of ornamentation is lavishly bestowed".

To those we now ascend, and "stand amid a scene of architectural glory which has no equal on earth. Above us rises the lofty dome, far up into the dim distance. The floor on which we tread is of polished marble and jasper, ornamented with a wainscoting of sculptured marble tablets inlaid with flowers formed of precious stones. Around are windows

or screens of marble filigree, richly wrought in various patterns which admit a faint and delicate illumination—what Ritualists would love to call a ‘dim, religious light’—into the gorgeous apartment. In the centre are the two tombs surrounded by a magnificent screen about 6 ft. high, with doors on the sides....” The brilliant description quoted above goes on for pages, sprinkling the highest praise on the ornamental designs of the famous screen and the tombs. Here too, the cenotaphs are not the real tombs: “The real sepulchre and the more ornamental sarcophagus stationed above ground are totally distinct”. Of the apartment which contains the latter, Fergusson speaks in glowing words: “The light to the central apartment is admitted only through double screens of white marble trellis-work of the most exquisite design, one on the outer, and one on the inner face of the walls. In our climate this would produce nearly complete darkness; but in India, and in a building wholly composed of white marble, this was required to temper the glare that otherwise would have been intolerable. As it is, no words can express the chastened beauty of that central chamber, seen in the soft gloom of the subdued light that reaches it through the distant and half-closed openings that surround it. When used as a Barran Durrie, or pleasure palace, it must always have been the coolest and the loveliest of garden retreats, and now

that it is sacred to the dead it is the most graceful and the most impressive of the sepulchres of the world”.

The exquisite marble screen that surrounds the tombs is a piece of superb workmanship. Its magnificent trellis-work is wrought into beautiful flowers and the borders are “inlaid with precious stones representing flowers executed with such wonderful perfection that the forms have as in nature, and the hues and shades of the stones, leaves and flowers appear almost real”. It is believed that the original screen around the tombs was of silver or bejewelled gold and that it was replaced, for fear of theft, by the present marvel of marble ordered by Aurangzeb. Even with the rich resources of the Mughals, this screen took ten years to complete which should give some idea of the extremely fine and beautiful carving which has been worked on it. This screen has been admired, and admired justly, by many. We quote one or two of the more poetic descriptions: “But the perfection of loveliness is the marble screen, which in separate slabs extends all round the marble tomb. These slabs are very large and several inches thick, but they are pierced and carved with the most elaborate open-work patterns, till they simply resemble a piece of exquisite lace, with a border of chiselled flowers—resembling flower-de-lis. Just try to realize it—an immense circular screen of lovely lace, which



on close inspection proves to be solid marble.”

The tomb of Mumtaz Mahal is placed at the exact centre of the apartment. It bears the symbolic tablet, representing a woman's heart on which her lord may write whatever he chooses. The inkstand on the adjacent tomb symbolises that of a man, here of Shah Jahan. Whether the emperor intended a separate mausoleum for himself or not, his son and successor Aurangzeb was too unfilial and too miserly to do anything more than let him lie, even at the expense of an effect, rather jarring, of unevenness and overcrowding, by the side of the woman whom he had loved so well !

The beautiful Cairene lamp, hanging above, is a gift, in admirable taste, from Lord Curzon, the British Viceroy whose indefatigable efforts towards the care and preservation of India's monuments deserve all praise. A great many rich accessories which belonged to this chamber and the tombs, including a pall of pearls, valued at several lakhs which covered the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal, were taken away at various stages during the three hundred years the Taj has been in existence. In fact, at one point, the very building was in danger of being demolished deliberately by another British Viceroy, William Bentinck. He had contemplated the sale of its marble but was,

fortunately, discouraged by the result of similar operations in respect of the marble baths removed from the palaces in the Agra Fort. As we observed earlier, so disgusted was one European visitor with this report that she exclaimed that she was glad that William Bentinck and she were not contemporaries, for “though I have no experience in bomb-throwing, my temptation would have been very great.”

To revert to the tombs. These bear the dates of death and names of the deceased. The tomb of Mumtaz Mahal bears, in addition, the ninety-nine names of God, as also other pious text. But what grips the attention here is the ornamentation, in *pietra dura*, on the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal, especially. This, according to Fergusson, constitutes “the most beautiful and precious style of ornament ever adopted in architecture.” To quote another admirer: “The snow-white marble is inlaid with flowers so delicately framed that they look like embroidery on white satin, so exquisitely is the mosaic executed in cornelian, blood-stone, agates, jasper, turquoises, lapis-lazuli and other precious stones”. In the words of Havell, “the white marble of her tomb blossoms with a never-fading garden of Persian flowers, which the Magic of the Moghul artists has created.” To quote Margaret Mordecai: “Flowers

indeed are laid in loving memory on many tombs, or planted there, but no matter how lovingly tended the time comes when they fade and go back to dust. The flowers which bloom on the tomb of Mumtaz and her lord and lover will never fade. Like the love which strewed them there they are immortal." What is more, all these flower-designs are so exquisitely executed and the stones so delicately inserted in the smooth polished surface of the marble that one can hardly trace any joinings. Considering all this beauty and profusion of ornament within, and all the "wreaths, scrolls and frets, as exquisite in design as beautiful in colour, which heighten the spandrils, the angles and the more important architectural details outside," who can deny that the Taj "stands first among the purely decorative forms of architectural design" and constitutes "the rarest of jewels!" The inscription on the tomb of the emperor has little value, having been composed by the false Aurangzeb. But that of Mumtaz, which was chosen by Shah Jahan himself, is most touching and beautiful: "The illustrious sepulchre of Arjumand Banu Begam, called Mumtaz Mahal. Died in 1040 A.H. (1630 A.D.). He is the Everlasting: He is sufficient. God is He besides whom there is no God. He knoweth what is concealed and what is manifest. He is merciful and compassionate. Nearer unto God are those who say, Our Lord is God!"

This then is the Taj where amidst an unparalleled glory of art and fragrance of homage, Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan rest in peace eternal. And whilst one walks back to the yet-distant exit casting lingering looks at the beauty behind and the loveliness around, one realizes the utter absurdity of the oft-asked question. What is the best time for seeing the Taj? As if such grace as that of the Taj needed the aid of light effects! No, "here is no need to place the beholder in a particular spot to cast a partial light upon the performance; the work which dazzles with its elegance at the *coup d'oeil* will bear the scrutiny of the microscope", and the play of any light or shade. Anne Flora Steel puts the matter rightly enough: "I saw the Taj for the first time when I was leaving India after five and twenty years of residence therein. I was prepared to criticize. I had heard so much of its beauty that I was inclined to doubt it. And my verdict of value simply as a personal equation—is that it is a bit of the New Jerusalem. It neither requires moonlight nor sunset, it brings its own atmosphere, its own light that "never yet was on sea or shore'."

True, "there are morningites and eveningites, moonlighters and middayers but they are all agreed that the Taj is the one incomparable building in India and in the world." In fact, one of the charms of the



Taj is that one could go on watching under the changing shadows of the day and the night how the sun and the moon and the light of the stars bathe it in colours which move over a range of pale green and dark violet, rose pink and dazzling white, of golden yellow, grey-blue and soft amber. That is why "like any other great architectural work, the Taj should be seen repeatedly under different lights." Villiers gives us his experience of a fine view of the Taj seen in the early morning: "An early visit to the Taj stands out vividly in my mind: the bitter cold of the driven in the half-light of an Indian November morning. The great square within at this early hour lay peaceful and empty. Presently at the entrance to the gardens appeared the aged door-keeper, unmistakably cross at being roused at such an hour. All day long the restless white-faced tourists came; on moonlight nights the gardens were often full of sightseers; but a man must have his rest, and it was clear he did not hold with foolish folk who might wish to see the gardens at sunrise.

"The light increased rapidly as I hurried up the flights of steps and under the splendid arch, over which, inlaid in black marble, the flowing Arabic letters invite the pure of heart to enter the Gardens of Paradise. Seen from within the entrance portal, rising above the mists which wrapped the cypress

trees and blurred the reflections in the wide canal, the Taj itself loomed white and ghostly—cheerless against a pale grey sky. Then, as I reached the water's edge, with a flash the topmost golden iris of the spire took the sun. Softly and rapidly the rosy light stole round the exquisite curve of the dome, flushing the smooth, pearly surface of the marble, till, striking the sides of the building, the sunshine at length reached the great white platform, lighting up each recess in a marvel of mauve shade and amber reflections; a fairy beauty, a spirit building, 'whose gates were as of pearl', hovering for a moment over earth. With the warmth of the sunrise the garden mists rose high, drifting away in turquoise wreaths between the deep green of the guardian cypress trees; whose slender shapes and curving topmost crests were now clearly mirrored in the still water, while between their dark reflections shone the Taj, a miracle revealed." And, Andre' Chevrillion, provides an equally enthusiastic description of the wonderful building at high noon. "I visit the Taj again at noonday. Under a vertical sun the melancholy phantom is dead, the gentle sadness of the mausoleum has disappeared. The great marble table upon which it stands has a blinding glitter. Reflected back and forth from all sides the sunlight multiplies its effect a hundred fold, and some of the facades are like white-hot metal. The incrustations

are sparks of living fire, and their hundred red flowers glow like burning coals. The sacred texts and hieroglyphics set in the black marble blaze, if written by the finger of an angry god. All the mystic rows of lotus and lily, in relief, which before had the softness of yellowed ivory, are now like flames upon the surface. I retreat to the edge of the enclosure, and dazzled, I see for an instant, relieved against the sky, the incandescent lines and surfaces of the edifice, implacable in its virgin whiteness. Certainly this strict simplicity and the intensity of this light have something semitic in their effect, like 'the flaming sword' of the Bible. The minarets rise into the blue like columns of fire". But lovely as the Taj is at all times, moonlight, nevertheless, imparts it a strange ethereal beauty so compelling that on full-moon nights, especially in Autumn, record crowds assemble to look at this celestial-seeming structure. It is then, to quote Mr. Cameron: "in the cold splendour the moonlight, that the Taj is at its most beautiful. Losing its substance, the dome becomes as thin as air and seems to hang, amongst the stars like a great, gleaming pearl". Another admirer of the "Taj by Moonlight", had this experience. "It was not till we returned at night to see the Taj by the light of a full moon that we realized its ethereal, unearthly liveliness, softened and undefined like some fairy dream. In the warm sunlight it seems to cut clear and

sharp against the blue, like a glittering iceberg. In the moonlight it is still dazzling, but seems as though newly buried beneath a deep fresh fall of snow, lying lightly on domes and pavement and minarets, and rising above the tall cypresses and dark rich mass of foliage, like some strange vision of purity. You can scarce believe that it is real. You hold your breath lest you should awaken and find that the beautiful picture was but a dream." A negative kind of tribute relating to *not* seeing the Taj by moonlight comes from Ethel Kelly: "The Taj one must not see first at high noon. My guide told me that and it created such a feeling of obstinate determination on my part to see why it was withheld till evening, that I can never get the marvellous charm it exerts on the mind of all who behold it first in the softening light of sunset. There is no doubt it is wonderful in formation and majestic in proportion. Each time I saw it I was impressed, but never once did I feel that aching sense, appreciation of great beauty forces upon one: *true there was no moon*. I had dreamed of seeing it in the pixies' light, a silvery poem; but always it was a baking hot, sun-reflecting tomb, hard, unresponsive." But the finest tribute from amongst the moonlighters comes from Margaret Mordecai: "First came a glimmer of silver through the trees on our right and slowly, slowly above them rose the moon. The minarets



began to sparkle, the apex of the dome to shimmer, and the whole dim outline to emerge from the darkness, and then suddenly the moon was clear of the trees and the Taj stood revealed in a flood of silver light. Like a white swan from its nest of reeds it seemed to rise above the scented dusk of the Indian Garden.

“As if an unseen hand had drawn aside the curtain

of the night and shown us a vision of paradise”.

From this glorious vision, the visitor needs must go back to the everyday world of mundane care and cold reality. Nevertheless, for him who has been blessed by its sight, the Taj will for ever remain the magic monument than which there is in the world none more beautiful.



**CHAPTER**

6





## The Bridge of Love

*For sudden the worst turnst the best to the brave,*

*The black minute's at end,  
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,*

*Shall dwindle, shall blend,  
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,*

*Then a light, then thy breast,  
O thou soul of my soul ! I shall clasp thee again,  
And with God be the rest !*

ROBERT BROWNING

THE MIRACLE IN WHITE MARBLE WHICH is the Taj Mahal has been standing for three hundred years now and generations upon generations of human beings who have delighted in the sight of this personification of beauty have blessed its builder. It is good that there is such a thing as deep and last-

ing attachment for some one so that when death snatches away the life we held dear, the heart, even though breaking with ache, can yet express its poignant pain in such magic monuments as the Taj. Since there is birth, since man is mortal, there will be necessarily the phenomenon called death. And, indeed, when the



emissaries of the dread god, Death, come and take away a beloved being, there is bound to be a great deal of grief. It is given, however, to some, a poet or a prince, to build that, a sonnet or a mausoleum, which for ever captures and engages the emotion, the great suffering and sorrow, of the bereaved. A Shakespeare might have done that in immortal rhyme. A Shah Jahan has left for us the immortal Taj.

While the white Taj stands looking so majestic and so beautiful, one wonders if there is any truth in the oft-made point that the Emperor Shah Jahan wished to build yet another mausoleum, of black marble, for himself on the other bank of the Yamuna and to connect the two mausolea with a black-and-white marble bridge. Indeed, there are those who can see the foundations of this other, black Taj. It is claimed that, but for the unfortunate and disgraceful event of Aurangzeb's usurpation of his father's throne, this plan would surely have been given effect to. As a matter of fact, the incongruously-placed tomb of Shah Jahan set alongside that of Mumtaz Mahal, is an argument in favour of the feasibility of the plan for a second Taj. For, if Shah Jahan had intended that he himself be buried by the side of Mumtaz Mahal in the same building, surely some provision could have been made for that and the otherwise exquisite sense of proportion

which is in evidence everywhere would not have been jeopardized in such an ungainly way. Of course, the fact that no provision was made for an extra tomb does not necessarily mean that another equally glorious and fetching Taj, albeit of black marble, was to be built across the Yamuna as a parallel construction. Even so, several critics persist in believing that the intention was certainly there. We observed that one of the arguments supporting this is the position of the two tombs. Writing of the placing of the tomb of Shah Jahan by the side of Mumtaz Mahal's, one authority on the Taj, Muin-ud-din Ahmed, gives a detailed account of what happened. He states that the fact that both the emperor and the empress lie under the same roof should not mean that such was Shah Jahan's intention. Possibly it never occurred to the emperor that such a thing would come to pass. Accepting for the sake of argument that he had thought of that, surely he would have seen to it that the plan provided for a larger enclosure, and Mumtaz's tomb would not have been set in the centre. As it is there is a sense of incongruity and disproportion—something which, so far as the Taj is concerned, one meets only here. It is obvious that we find the tomb of Shah Jahan where we do because of the force of events, because of some other compulsion. The fact is that Shah Jahan had never intended that he too was to be buried

in the same mausoleum. Rather, his desire was to have yet another mausoleum of like splendour and glory across the river in the Mehtab Bagh, right opposite to the Taj Mahal, and to connect the two tombs through a marble bridge, so that visitors might easily move across from one mausoleum to the other. Indeed, he had started some preliminary work from this point of view. Of this one finds some signs even today, signs which one can clearly see from the existing structure. But hardly had he begun the construction when his sons set off the war of succession, and with brother shedding the blood of brother, Aurangzeb snatched the reigns of power. Shah Jahan was no longer emperor, but a royal prisoner in the fort of Agra, and there was no question of giving shape to his plan. His longing in this respect remained unsatisfied and he passed away with only half of his dream realised. As he lay dying, he did express his wish that he was to be buried in the Mehtab Bagh; but with the treasury strained already through extravagant expenses on his never-ending wars, Aurangzeb was not inclined to do that. Having got the formal permission of learned and holy men to set aside a dying father's wish on grounds of its being contrary to religious injunctions, he ordered that Shah Jahan be interred in the Taj mausoleum. "My father" said he "loved my mother beyond measure. It is meet, therefore, that his resting place

should be by her side"; and fate so ordained that even in death the lovers should be together, under the same incomparable roof—of the Taj.

Another argument is that the placing of the main building of the Taj on the bank of the river at one end, instead of putting it in the centre of an enclosure as is the case with other tombs and mausolea was due to the fact that there had to be another parallel building, a kind of *Jawab*—like the two buildings, mosque and its *Jawab* which now flank the Taj—on the other side. Then and as with the Taj, there would have been yet another garden, and a great gateway, and all the rest, so that the enclosure would have been completed with these two, the miracle in white and the miracle in black, both joined together by perhaps a bridge half-black and half-white, both together occupying the central position even as we find in the other Mughal mausolea. All this sounds fairly convincing. And for a minute one is lost in the contemplation of what such a double construction would have looked like. Had this scheme been completed, there is little doubt that the reality of such a dream would have far exceeded in beauty and grandeur anything that exists anywhere on this planet. The Taj is vast enough, and as it stands it is great and glorious and grand as few other buildings upon earth are. Had the 'undone



vast' been also achieved...but imagination reels and staggers at the thought of such a stupendous possibility.

However, the black Taj, of life, yet to end, was never built and only the white Taj, of death, already come, was erected. The bridge, the link between life and death, also never came into being. Yet, in a different sense, the Taj is itself that bridge, is, indeed, not a symbol of sorrow and death but a symbol of life and love. Rather, if it is the symbol of life, loving and patiently putting slab upon slab for years on end and sketching with cunning and loving care such beautiful patterns to adorn those slab's that the memory of one who was once a life, might be perpetuated, Shah Jahan's wondrous work is verily the bridge of love—love which has in all these countless centuries during which man has lived upon earth, always connected the living with those departed from our midst. The cruel hand of death can remove the physical presence of our near and dear, and the body may become dust with the dust, but the writ of death does not run upon our thoughts and feelings; upon our minds and hearts it has no controls; these it cannot command. To the eye of our soul our beloved is ever visible. On the wings of his imagination, a great poet like Dante could go down into the deepest pit of purgatory and reach

up to the highest heavens to trace his dear Beatrice. Likewise even the meanest of human being has this capacity for love, not only to grieve for him or her whom cruel fate has parted from us for ever and for ever, but also to direct and transport our thoughts and remembrance, along the bridge of love to the one who is seemingly no more. Whatever Shah Jahan made is beautiful, is great, is an immortal tribute to his love and loyalty. Mumtaz Mahal, his beloved and faithful queen, great and greatly loved, deserved such a tribute, and no doubt it became a great and splendid emperor like Shah Jahan to build such a rich and gracious memorial. But for one couple like Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal, there are millions upon millions of others who cannot do aught beyond letting their thoughts wander from the land of the living to the world of the dead for consolation, and for such peace as contemplation of the beloved will give them, and spanning the great gulf which lies between the two worlds with no concrete bridge of stone steel or silver, but with the rainbow of sentiment, with the bridge of Love.

For the thing that endures in this passing show, our world, is neither brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea, neither impregnable rocks, nor gates of steel, nor for that matter the rhymes and black ink of our Shakespeares, but love. And only

those become immortal who live to love and who, when those whom they love die, can say sincerely, what Shah Jahan could, apropos his Mumtaz :

*No later light has lightened up my heaven,  
No second morn has ever shone for me;  
All my life's bliss from thy dear life was given,  
All my life's bliss is in the grave with thee.*

One is tempted to write *finis* at this point of passion and poetry, but even at the risk of affecting a clumsy anti-climax, a paragraph or two have to be added. Some time ago, the writer had occasion to meet a very highly placed official of the Department of Archaeological Survey of India, one who is an authority on, and is directly incharge of the monuments of the country. In the middle of an earnest conversation about matters of art and architecture, I asked him most casually as to how long, in his opinion, the Taj would endure as a building. He who had grown up, so to say, among the ruins and remnants of the past, and should have been used to such queries and questions as matter of course, was taken aback. The world, India, Agra without the Taj ? Inconceivable ! He had somehow taken it for granted that the Taj which was not but for a mere three hundred years of the past would ornament the earth for ever. And yet, the earth has been spinning on merrily without the Black Taj which

was conceived but never constructed, and surely would have done the same without the White one which exists. Is it that that which we see not we miss not ? If so, how should one explain Keats,

*Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are  
sweeter ?*

Verily, the built Taj is beautiful but the unbuilt one...! who knows ? All that one can say is that in this case also, as in all human wishes and endeavour, the words of Browning apply :

*What hand and brain went ever paired ?  
What heart alike conceived and dared ?  
What act proved all its thought had been ?  
What will but felt the fleshly screen ?*

And yet praise be to those who make beautiful things for these are the joy of generations which follow. One is grateful enough for the Taj, even if it is an uncompleted building, for that which is; and there is no need to indulge in vain and sentimental regret over that which might have been. On the other hand, man's present anxiety should be—and not for the Taj alone, but for all the beauty which his cunning mind and skilful hands have fashioned, nay for whatever exists upon earth today—on an altogether different account. That, however, is



another subject and one which is far removed from the domain of art. It deals not with matters of love and life, not with beautiful objects which delight the soul, but with sleek engines of destruction and

with fearful things which spell horror for the human mind. About all that, therefore, let a single sentence serve as the summing up: The nuclear bombs are poised—and God save the Tajs of the World !



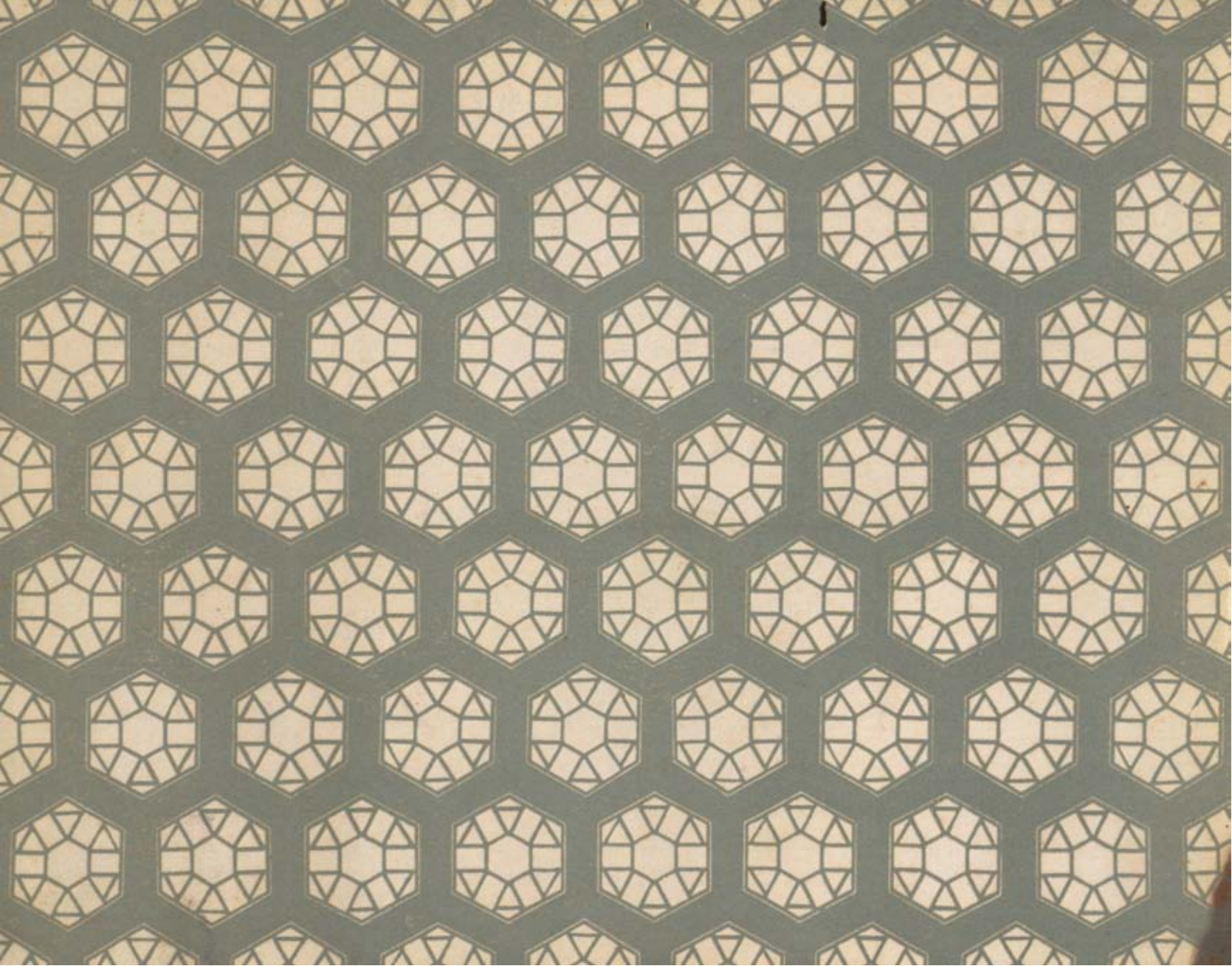
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